

Reflections

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Reflections

by [darlingsdream](#)

Summary

“You’ve been out there, right?” George motions beside him toward the mountains. “Beyond the kingdom gates?”

“A handful of times,” he answers truthfully— well, truthfully enough.

“You think it’s scary out there?” He motions towards the edge of the balcony extravagantly as Dream processes the question.

There were a few ways Dream could answer that, he decides. Those walls were the only thing that has kept him safe from what was out beyond them, something he was eternally grateful for. Venturing outside of those walls was a death trap for him for a multitude of reasons, reasons that George certainly did not need to know. Ever.

“Yeah,” Dream settles with, turning to take one last glance of the mountains beyond the gates. “Absolutely terrifying.”

In which Dream is assigned as Prince George's new personal guard and finds that it is surprisingly easy to fall for the royal with the spunky attitude but incredibly hard to keep his secrets from him.

Inspired by Reflections by The Neighborhood

Notes

I want to start off with saying that this is my first DreamNotFound fanfic!

I want to make it clear that I do not support irl shipping. When I say that I ship dreamnotfound I mean their online personas, not the real people themselves. I understand that in reality, they're just friends and that's all they want to be! With that being said, since both content creators have both set their boundaries with their fanbases and have said it is okay to ship them, I felt comfortable posting this. I want to make it clear that it is not okay to ship content creators if they deliberately say it makes them uncomfortable. If either Dream or George come forward and say the shipping makes them uncomfortable, I will take this down. I'll most likely take it down if any of the content creators see it as well.

All I ask of you guys is to not make ANY copies of this work! This includes posting it to wattpad, passing around PDFS, or uploading it to other sites.

If you're interested in reading this on wattpad, I am posting this fanfic there too under darlingsdream. If you're itching to get updates quicker, I will be posting 1,000 word chapters there VERY often! I will only update this version when I have at least 5,000+ for a chapter.

Lastly, if you're interested in seeing the art I have made for this fic, it's also posted on wattpad (darlingsdream) and my twitter (darlingsvdream)!

With that being said, I hope you guys enjoy!

Post Change

For the past twenty minutes, give or take a few, Dream had been trailing behind the royal advisor with a small group of his fellow guardsmen as they went over what was to be expected of them in the following weeks. In exactly three weeks from now, the young prince would be turning twenty-five. Royal birthdays were always a big thing in their kingdom; a celebration that would take weeks in advance to prepare for.

"Most of your posts have not changed," the royal advisor announces from ahead of him, taking an abrupt stop at the end of the hallway they had been going down. "Rosters will be posted in your living quarters for this month by sundown. As for Dream and Skeppy, your posts have been changed until further notice."

There's a quick nudge at his side, the feeling of an elbow grazing his ribcage. At his left, Skeppy looked up at him with raised eyebrows and a half-amused smile. The two of them had been posted at the kingdom's gate since they became royal guards; making this their first post change.

"Skeppy, you'll be stationed in the left wing with the cooks." That station was manageable; all you had to do was make sure none of the cooks stole any food rations and make sure rations were brought in. While Skeppy seemed dissatisfied with the change, it was definitely a step-up from gate duty.

"As for you, Dream, you will be posted with the young prince."

There's an audible intake of breath at his side and Dream finds that Skeppy has the same amount of confusion written across his face as he felt. Turning back to the royal advisor, he raised his shoulders defensively as if to say that statement didn't sound right.

The advisor simply shrugged, tearing his eyes away from him.

"You can be dismissed now."

He watched in frozen silence as the fellow guards dispersed into the hallway behind him, making their way back to the guards' living quarters. Skeppy shoots him a look he can't quite decipher before following after them in a rush.

"What happened to his other personal guard?" Dream can't help but ask, a nervous chuckle escaping him before he can really notice it. "Was it too much for him?"

"Not too sure," the royal advisor answers earnestly. "We were informed he just stopped showing up. Probably ran away, it wouldn't be the first time a personal guard has done such a thing."

For a second, he really wonders if he heard the man in front of him right. He knew that most of the royals were stuck up and hard to deal with, but had the young prince been too much for the guard that he needed to just run away without a word?

He decided not to dwell on that thought when the advisor began walking again, and instead, wondered how in the world *he* of all the guards got chosen to become the young prince's new guard. Personal guards were usually picked by the royals themselves, but there hadn't been a time when Dream remembered coming face to face with the prince.

While he'd been a royal guard since he turned eighteen, Dream had not had the pleasure of meeting the king, queen, nor prince in person. Most of his time as a guard was spent outside of the castle

walls, out in the village, and out beyond the walls that kept their kingdom safe.

"Prince George requests your presence immediately," the royal advisor says as if Dream didn't get the notice on that when he started following him again down the long castle hallways.

"Right, right," Dream replies, rolling his eyes out of habit. It was times like these he was thankful for the mask that he wore.

When they finally reached their destination, Dream had all but walked the entirety of the castle. The royal advisor had stopped them in front of two large glass doors that were distorted enough that you couldn't make out what was on the other side.

"Good luck," the advisor chuckles, clasping a hand onto his armored shoulder in a sympathetic gesture. "You're going to need it." The advisor taps the side of his shoulder twice before turning on his heel and hustling down the hallway; leaving him standing dumbfoundedly at the towering doors in front of him.

Perfect. Just great.

With the smallest bit of hesitation, Dream makes his way toward the doors, reaching a gloved hand to the handle only to pause mid-movement.

Through the distorted glass, he's able to make out the figure of someone standing on the other side. They're standing stiffly in front of what looked like a window, hands tucked behind the curve of their back. He takes a moment to appreciate the quiet and stillness that comes from the image before pushing the doors open.

The first thing he's greeted with is light—an *absurd* amount of light. The room is lined from floor to ceiling with large windows that overlook the castle's gardens, a beautiful sight all in all. The second thing he is greeted with is a soft, yet confused, glance from the one and only Prince George.

Frankly; he is nowhere *close* to what he expected him to look like.

He had tousled dark brown hair that had been tossed to one side. His eyes were as mesmerizing as the sun itself with flecks of golden light performing ballets throughout them. He had dark eyebrows that sloped downwards in a serious expression. His lips were pale and thin, his nose slender, rounded with a prominent jaw that curved gracefully.

He watched as the blue silk cape around his broad shoulders swayed behind him effortlessly—studied the slender hands that were wrapped in leather fingerless gloves—took notice in the beads that were strung around the belt that clung to his slim waist—and *choked*.

To put it short and sweet; he was attractive. The type of attractive that had Dream losing his grasp on the doors behind him, causing them to slam shut with a sound that echoed around the room.

"Do you not know how to knock?"

Dream freezes, noticing no change in the prince's facial expression. Was he being serious? Was he actually mad that he didn't knock? Hadn't he been the one to request his presence in the first place?

"I—" He pauses, licking his lips. Why did his throat feel so dry?

"Don't hurt yourself *thinking* there," Prince George *laughs*—a bubbly laugh that has Dream's stomach soaring. A smile pulls on his lips, a smile that leaves dimples imprinting into his cheeks. "I was kidding. It's a pleasure to meet you, Dream."

In a swift motion, Prince George is making his way toward him; his cape blowing behind him elegantly as he plucks the glove off his right hand. Suddenly, there is a slim hand shoved in his face and finally Dream notices that his fingers are painted a dark gray color.

Having not worn his own gloves today, Dream takes his hand softly. Their hands slot together nicely and Dream can't help but notice how warm Prince George is when he firmly shakes his hand.

"It's a pleasure to meet you as well, your highness."

The young prince rolls his eyes, dropping his hand at the formality. "You don't need to stick to the formalities, honestly. George is just fine."

Unsure whether this was the prince baiting him into breaking guard code or not, Dream sighs.

"Prince's names aren't supposed to be spoken informally," he points out. "It's one of the first things we all learn."

"Boring," Prince George comments, poking an accusing finger at his armored chest. "Don't tell me you're a stick in the mud like everybody else here is."

Dream can't help the amused smile that takes over him; at least the Prince couldn't see it. "I'm a pretty fun person once you get to know me."

"Is that so?" Prince George all but challenges as he tosses his head over his shoulder, his eyes landing back on the large window at his side. "I guess we'll have to see about that, then."

Dream only hums in reply, watching as the prince makes his way to one of the comfortable-looking loveseats in the middle of the room.

"Would you like to take a seat?" George offers, but he politely declines.

"I'm okay with standing," he answers, making his way further into the room. He stands a few feet in front of George, feeling a bit uneasy when he notices the prince taking a once over of him before turning away with a scoff.

"If you don't mind me asking— what's with the whole mask thing?"

Out of pure habit, Dream stiffens. He's been wearing the mask since he became a guard for a reason he'd rather not spill to someone he'd just met. In all honesty, he hasn't spilled the truth to anyone about the mask. It wasn't like anyone really asked about it anymore, especially since the only people he came in contact with were fellow guardsmen who knew how he was.

Testing the waters, and pushing his own damn luck, Dream throws a snarky comment back to the prince.

"If *you* don't mind me asking, what's with you picking me as your personal guard?"

The question clearly throws George off. Looking at him from the corner of his eye, Dream catches the way his smile dips into a small frown.

"Touché."

"Really though," Dream starts, a sarcastic smile forming under his mask, "We've never met before, your highness. It's a rare occasion I come into the actual castle. What made you choose me?"

George shrugs, still avoiding making eye contact with him. "Curiosity. It's hard to miss seeing you around, you stick out like a sore thumb. I've caught a few glances at you walking with the other guards before so I asked around about you."

He can't help the snicker that escapes him at that. "You're admitting to stalking me, eh?"

"I—I never said *that*," George gasped, and Dream watches all of his composure breaks. That stony cold expression he'd been wearing when Dream had first walked into the room had been replaced with something he could only explain as pure embarrassment. The prince's cheeks were growing a rosy red, and Dream would be lying if he didn't feel a little bit proud.

"It sure sounds like that. That, or, you're admitting you're actually my secret admirer, either-or."

This time, George *does* make eye contact with him. His eyebrows are raised, his mouth agape.

"That's not *it*," George exclaims, rolling his eyes. "You know, you're something else. I like that about you. I *really* like that about you, actually."

And now it's Dream's turn to be embarrassed.

"Well, now that we've gotten introductions out of the way," George begins to stand, wiping his gloved palms together, "you said you barely come into the castle, right? Let me show you around."

Dream doesn't say another word after that as he follows the prince out of the room and back into the twisted hallways of the castle.

After barely walking around the castle for twenty minutes, and only seeing a handful of rooms, Dream decides very quickly that he already hates being a personal guard. It wasn't that Prince George was annoying or anything, at least he wasn't being annoying *yet*, but the sheer amount of hallways and stairs they've walked already has his calves and thighs burning.

George had been in the middle of explaining something about the dining halls when Dream found himself cutting him off.

"Don't you get tired walking around here all the time?"

George pauses in his footsteps in front of him, slowly turning his head over his shoulders.

"What? Tired already? I thought you'd be used to walking so much since you, after all, were a gate guard."

Not annoying statement has been detracted. Just for that comment.

"It's a lot easier to walk around on flat land for long periods of time rather than going up and down a bunch of flights of stairs," Dream points out.

"Okay, whatever you say, *Dream*."

George is back to walking at a fast pace in front of him quicker than he could snap his fingers. Rolling his eyes, he takes after him, trying to ignore how loud his armor sounded as he walked through the castle halls.

"Dream's not your real name, right?" George questions from a head of him after a few quiet minutes.

"Of course not," Dream scoffs. "If it was I am pretty sure my parents could be jailed for child neglect."

George's bubbly laughter basically *engulfs* him.

"I guess you're right. Why do you go by Dream then? Is your real name worse or something?"

"You know, you ask a lot of questions," Dream replies, catching a servant's eyes from the corner of his mask. They bowed slightly at the duo before scurrying down the hallway past them.

"I'm a curious person."

"I can tell. All the guards here use different names. Have you not noticed?"

For the second time that day, George is stopping in his tracks. This time, he turns his whole body toward Dream, his entire face dropping.

"What! No, I didn't notice! Barely any of the guards actually speak more than two words to me," he explains in a loud whisper, his hands moving around frantically. "So you all use these absurd names?"

"I wouldn't call them absurd," Dream answers. "Most of the guards use them to protect their real identity. Off duty, guards tend to get targeted a lot... Other than that, it's mostly for fun. No one ever questions it, especially you know, the royals. It's just a guard thing."

George stares at him like he's grown a second head.

"You guys use different names for... fun?"

"Why not?" Dream shrugs. "For me, I use Dream to hide my identity. Personal reasons."

George crinkles his nose at that. "What, are you on the run or something? Hiding under a mask, using a code name, kind of *sus* if you were to ask me."

Dream feels his blood run cold for a moment before he realizes George is most definitely smiling up at him.

"Kidding of course, *just kidding*."

George doesn't ask another question as they make their way up to the royal wing, and for that, Dream is thankful. If George asked him one more question within the same hour he may have just lost it.

At some point, Dream had found them walking up a staircase in one of the towers. There had to have been more than twenty flights of stairs and he was really starting to wonder if he was just out of shape or if George just was used to the stairs.

"Don't tell me your living quarters are all the way up *there*."

"Then I won't be saying anything," George laughed, his words echoing around them in the tower.

When they had finally reached the top of the stairs, they were greeted with again another set of glass doors. George opened them gingerly, motioning for Dream to follow him. "As bad as the trek is to getting up here, the view is *amazing*."

Walking into the young Prince's room, he realized just how much he loved the color blue. The

tapestries hung to the wall were made of royal blue and golden silks, the king-sized bed in the middle of the room fitted with light baby blue sheets. Hell, even the *rug* was a dark blue.

"Are you obsessed with blue or something?"

"Blue's the only color I can see well," George answers easily like he'd gotten the question thousands of times before.

Looking to his side, he watched as George threw open the glass doors to the balcony. "You're color blind?"

"So so," George explains before stepping out onto the balcony. Dream follows after him, feeling the cool autumn air nip at his exposed neck. True to his word, the view was *amazing*. From the balcony, you could see the entire kingdom basically. You could even see the kingdom gates, and Dream realized very quickly how George knew about him.

Just barely, he could make out the two forms standing at the kingdom gate dressed in red and yellow capes. He knew one of them had to have been Nick—or, as the other guards called him, Sapnap.

Weird.

Beyond the gates though, Dream took notice of the sloping mountains out in the distance that illuminated red with the rising sun.

"Oh, wow," Dream so eloquently gets out as he leans against the railing of the balcony.

"You've been out there, right?" George motions beside him toward the mountains. "Beyond the kingdom gates?"

Dream takes a moment to glance at George, who is looking almost longingly off the balcony.

"A handful of times," he answers truthfully—well, *truthfully enough*.

"Is it as pretty out there as people say it is?" There's a hint of desperation lingering in his tone that has Dream's stomach doing cartwheels.

"Yeah," he answers, tearing his way from the prince. "I think it is."

George is quiet at his side for a while, simply just admiring the scenery in front of him like a child would admire a candy store. It's cute, he decides, how George's bottom lip is sucked in under his top teeth just the slightest, his eyes wider than saucers, his face flooded in the golden morning light.

With a heavy breath, George finally looks his way, a small smile curling on his face. "You think it's scary out there?" He motions towards the edge of the balcony extravagantly as Dream processes the question.

There were a few ways Dream could answer that, he decides. Those walls were the only thing that has kept *him* safe from what was out beyond them, something he was eternally grateful for.

Venturing outside of those walls was a death trap for him for a multitude of reasons, reasons that George certainly did not need to know. *Ever*.

"Yeah," Dream settles with, turning to take one last glance of the mountains beyond the gates. "Absolutely terrifying."

For whatever reason, George seems satisfied with his answer. With a small nod and hum, George is ducking back into his room, hands shoved into his pockets. Dream follows after him, closing the glass doors behind him with care, unlike how George had opened them.

By the time he's turned around George is already standing in the corner of his room in front of a bookcase that stretches from the floor to the ceiling, a multitude of colored books poking out from the shelves.

Short attention span much?

"Do you read, Dream?" George questions with care as he pulls one of the books out by its spine.

"Couldn't say I have a lot of time to read," he replies. Thinking back on it, during his time as a guard, he'd barely picked up two books. All of his spare time was spent at the village shops gathering new equipment for gear, food, and whatever else the other guards had asked for before he slipped out for the day. It was rare he truly got a "day off."

George turns on his heel, his cape wrapping around his legs before it straightens itself out behind him. "Say you did read often, what would your favorite genre be?"

"Don't tell me you're a bookworm," Dream groans, almost immediately regretting the question. He should really watch how he talks around George, and quick at that. He had no idea how George would perceive his humor, let alone if he'd get him *fired* for it. He'd heard of royals being stuck up enough to get guards and servants fired over the smallest things, and truthfully, Dream couldn't afford getting fired.

There was nowhere for him to start over if he was.

"You gain a love for books when that's the only thing you have to do all day," George insists before extending the green-covered book in his hand toward him. "You're going to want to have something to keep you busy. My life isn't as fun as it seems."

Dream *almost* laughs as he takes the cold leather book into his hands, examining the gold lettering on the cover.

"Pride and Prejudice."

"It's one of my favorites," George explains. He taps the book a few times before turning right back around to his bookshelf. "You might like it. If you don't, there are at least another thousand books to pick and choose from. Feel free to look through them."

Dream, as confused as he is, decides to skim through the book while he stands, thumbing through the pages slowly.

When George has picked out his own book, he sits on the edge of his bed. "You can sit at my desk if you'd like, unless you want to stand, seeing as you somehow enjoy that."

"Thank you." Dream politely does take his offer this time, making his way to George's desk that was right across from his bed. When he pulls out the old wooden chair, he finds that the back is padded with a dark red cushion suited for a king, very unlike the old rickety chairs in the guard's quarters. With an almost sad sigh, he situates himself on the seat, remembering just how much he hates sitting down with his armor on.

When Dream turns his head over his shoulder, George is already hunched over the book he'd picked out, his legs hanging off the edge of the bed like a child. Content with the scene, Dream

turns back to the desk and opens to the first page of the worn book.

The hours ticking down to the afternoon go relatively fast as the two sit in silence. Normally, Dream would *hate* sitting in silence, especially with someone he didn't know too well. However, the silence that stuck in the room was almost comforting.

He could hear the wind rustling trees just outside of the balcony, a sound that had replaced the once chirping birds of the summer. The sound was soothing honestly, better than listening to the screams and shouts from those in the village.

Every once in a while, Dream would peer over his shoulder just to make sure somehow the young prince didn't just drop dead on his watch, and each time he did, George would glance up from his book and send him a warm smile before returning back to his stiff silence.

All in all, it was nice just sitting around. It was a pleasantry he didn't indulge in often.

"It should almost be time for dinner," George says some time after the sun begins to set. Having gotten through a good few chapters, Dream creases the corner of the page he'd just finished before shutting it. When he stands, he doesn't mind the slight ache in his legs from having not moved in a couple of hours.

With a spunk in his step, George is quickly on his feet, already heading straight for his bedroom door. "When do the guards usually eat?" He asks as he opens the door, holding it out for him as they start their way down the staircase.

"Depends," Dream answers as he grasps the cool brick wall at his side. "I will probably eat once you go to bed for the night. Usually, the guards at the gate eat once shift changes happen. There's no set time."

"Does that mean you eat alone?"

"Yes. A good portion of the time."

George hums as they make it to the bottom of the staircase, opening another door that would lead them into the main hallway of the castle. Once they make it into the hall, Dream follows after George just a few steps behind him, taking notice of the many servants that littered the hallway now.

They all bowed as they passed, George simply waving them off as they went along.

Maybe George truly wasn't someone who valued formalities.

When they finally do make it to the dining hall, a thought hits Dream like a freight train. He was about to meet the King and Queen for the first time.

God, he hoped he didn't mess this up. He never signed up to be a personal guard. This "upgrade" was still something he was trying to wrap around his head. It didn't help either that they just kind of *threw* him into this position without any explanation or more training. He'd never interacted with any royals around *here* before, and yet, they were just trusting him to do his best without training?

How awful.

George makes it into the room first, greeting the two guards that stood on either side of the entrance happily. Both guards were wearing face shields and helmets, a uniform Dream didn't

normally see.

Greeting the two with a nod, Dream stepped into the golden lit room with a held breath.

"George honey, how was your day?" A gruff voice echoes in the room, a voice that is laced heavily with a British accent.

The second that George steps out from in front of him and makes his way around the table, Dream is faced with the king who sat at the head of the table. He looked a lot like George, and suddenly, he knew where his good looks came from. At his right side, a woman dressed in a dark green silk dress with dirty blonde hair that ends at the middle of her back turns and meets eyes with him.

"It was good," George replies, taking his seat on the left of his father.

Now, honestly, Dream was good at faking confidence. It wasn't *that* hard, especially as someone who faked being a lot of things. But right now, he was feeling the most intimidated he has ever felt in his life.

"This must be Dream, right?" The woman suddenly asks and finally, Dream just feels the whole weight of the world crush onto his shoulders.

Remembering his place in *this* world, he quickly bows, clearing his throat rather quickly. "It's a pleasure to meet you, your highnesses."

"It's a pleasure to meet you as well," is all the king says when he rises.

That's it. That's all that's said to him. In an instant, their attention is being pushed back onto George and he finally can feel like he can breathe again. When he averts his eyes from them, he catches eyes with a familiar guard situated in the back of the room. At his side, another very familiar face stands with him, looking stiff and uneasy.

Tommy and Tubbo?

With his arms folded against his back, he makes his way around the table and situates himself beside the fellow personal guards, feeling some tension from his shoulders ease.

"*Dream,*" Tommy all but hisses through his teeth. "What the *fuck* are you doing here, man?"

"Posts got changed," he whispers back frantically. "Prince George's other guard went awol apparently."

"Quackity went awol?" Tubbo whispers from the other side of Tommy, finally peeking over the other to look at Dream. "Am I hearing that right?"

"Guess so," Tommy comments back. "Wouldn't surprise me. Quackity always complained that being in this castle drove him nuts."

Dream doesn't recognize the name, but he nods solemnly. "Wouldn't blame him."

"How are you holding up so far?" Tubbo whispers earnestly. "Do you like the castle so far?"

"Absolutely not," Dream sighs, shaking out his shoulders. He keeps his eyes trained on George who sits a good twenty feet in front him as he animatedly speaks to his parents, a happy smile spread across his face. "The Prince isn't so bad, it's more of the fact he lives up in a huge ass tower that has like a hundred stairs."

"Awe, *pissbaby*, are you out of shape?" Tommy coes from his side, nudging him just the slightest. The royals in front of them don't seem to notice their banter, thankfully, too indulged in their own conversation.

"Oh, *fuck off*. I could outrun you any day."

The rest of the dinner goes well. The royals don't even bother them, thankfully. If Dream had to interact with the King and Queen much longer he may as well just die right on the spot.

After about an hour, when the sun has fully set, they're finally dismissed from the table. As George pushes out from his seat, he pauses, turning towards Dream and waiting for him.

"That's my cue, I think," Dream whispers, tilting his head to the young guards beside him. "I'll see you two later." The two nod to him as they all go in their separate directions. When Dream makes it to George's side, he finally starts his way out of the dining hall.

"Did you know those other guards? I noticed you guys talking."

"Well, you're observant, aren't you," Dream chuckles nervously.

"Pretty observant, actually."

"Noted," Dream sighs.

God, he was going to lose this job fast if George was actually really observant. What if he wasn't as chill as he seemed? What if he found some way to get him fired.

That's probably a stupid way to think.

When they make it to the door of George's tower, the two pause.

"You can make your way back to your quarters now, I'll probably be going to sleep soon."

"Are you sure?" Dream quickly questions, watching wearily as George opens the door.

"I'll be fine. Good night, Dream."

"Good night, Prince George."

When Dream makes it back to the guards' quarters, it's packed inside. He pushes through his fellow guards, mumbling and apologizing until he makes his way to the small empty kitchen. He fixes himself a small cold meal with some leftovers that were left in the cupboard and sits by himself at the small rickety table.

The small dining room is so very different compared to the castle's dining hall. The royals were fed fresh warm food as they sat together at an elongated table. Their room was filled with bright orange lights that gave a warm and welcoming feel to the room.

The small dining room of the guards' quarters had a small simple table with six chairs, a single broken window in the middle of the room, and was lit with one candle that sat in the middle of the table.

Dream wasn't complaining though, this was the life he chose to have, after all.

He's halfway through eating the cold mashed potatoes when he feels a hand clap down onto his

shoulder, shaking him slightly.

"Dream," a deep voice greets him as the chair beside him is pulled out. "Skeppy told me you got switched to being a personal guard. You're kidding, right?"

"I wish I was, Sapnap," Dream answers after having swallowed a mouth full of the cold food that left him feeling as hollow as he did before he started eating. "I love how they just threw me into the job without a warning."

"Was it bad?" Sapnap questions and Dream doesn't fail to notice the way he cringes in on himself.

"It actually wasn't," he answers truthfully. "I haven't really figured him out yet, but, Prince George seems nice enough. All we did was sit around a *read* today. What a nerd." He laughs, shoving another spoonful of cold mashed potatoes into his mouth.

"He's going to domesticate you, god damn it!" Sapnap shouts, grabbing his shoulders and shaking him. He almost chokes when he grabs Sapnap's arms in return, attempting to push him away as he swallows.

"Am I witnessing a murder?" A familiar voice enters the room, and when Dream turns to see who it could be, he's met with Skeppy holding two rolls of bread in his hand.

Sapnap lets go of him quickly, standing in a moment's notice. "Don't tell me you stole food on your first day."

"I didn't!" Skeppy gasps offendedly before shoving one of the rolls towards Sapnap. "One of the cooks gave me some extras on my way out! He was really nice and said he didn't want them to go to waste."

With greedy hands, Sapnap snatches the roll and takes a bite, humming almost immediately.

"Oh my god, it's still *warm*."

"You're kigging," Dream accuses when Skeppy extends the second roll to him. Too happily, he pulls the roll apart and watches as steam emits into the air.

"Skeppy, have I told you recently how much I love you?"

"Yes, but another reminder would be nice."

Dream is awoken the following day by the feeling of his mask being pulled over his face. Out of instinct, he's slamming his hand over his mask, making sure it's fully covering his face as he shoots up in his bed. Upon opening his eyes, he notices Sapnap blinking owlishly at him, their foreheads just a few centimeters away from crashing into one another.

"Good morning sleeping beauty," Sapnap quickly greets him, still wearing his night clothes. "I fixed your mask, your nose was showing. Has anyone ever told you how cute your nose is?"

"Shut up," Dream groans, readjusting his mask correctly over his face.

He knew how weird it was that he slept with the mask, but he didn't care. He did what he had to do to keep his identity a secret and that's all that mattered. None of the other guards ever questioned him about it, thankfully. They all had their weird quirks too.

"What time is it? And why are you waking me up?"

"The sun is just starting to rise," Sapnap replies as he sits on the edge of Dream's rickety cot.
"Someone's here to see you."

"What do you mean someone's here to see me?" Dream's already pushing the covers off him and onto Sapnap. Turning to the cot beside him, he sees that Skeppy is still dead asleep. Normally, they were the first two awake, as they had the first morning shift outside of the gates. That shift wouldn't normally start for another hour or so.

Before Sapnap can even answer him, another guard is walking into the room with a purpose in his step.

"Why's Prince George looking for you, Dream. What did you *do*."

There, standing in the doorway still in his night clothes is no other than Wilbur, the head guard.

"I didn't do *anything*," he bites back, already standing from his cot. "Why is that nerd here?"

"He said he wants to see you, that's all," Wilbur replies before crossing his arms against his chest like an angry father. "So I'm asking again, what did you do?"

"Again, I didn't do anything. My post got switched, I'm his personal guard now or whatever," Dream replies as he walks to the other end of the shared room with Skeppy and Sapnap. He begins to pull his armor from its standing, changing carelessly in front of the other guards.

"What about Quackity?"

"I don't know who that is, but from what I heard, he went awol."

"So... The Prince chose *you* of all people to be his replacement?"

Having got the chest piece of his armor on, he turns around, throwing his hands up in the air.
"Wow, what a surprise, huh?"

"I'm not saying that's a bad thing," Wilbur corrects himself, leaning onto the doorway with a yawn.
"I am surprised. I didn't think you spent much time in the castle. How would he know who you are?"

"He's a *stalker*," Dream chuckles, getting the last pieces of his armor together. "Apparently he watches the gate guards and I caught his eye."

"Awe! That's kind of romantic!" Sapnap chuckles, and honestly, Dream's surprised that Skeppy hasn't woken up yet.

"Oh, shut up." Dream throws his nightshirt in Sapnap's direction, only to have it land on the floor in front of his socked feet.

Turning back towards the armory, he makes sure to grab his gloves and cloak as he grabs his sword and secures it to his back.

"Better go see what *lover boy* wants," Sapnap snickers from Dream's bed.

"Don't make it weird. He's a *stalker*, not a *lover boy*," Dream is quick to correct as he slips past Wilbur through the doorway.

Walking out into the main hallway, he already notices a good handful of the other guards awake. Most of them are standing in the doorways of their rooms, looking back and forth down the

hallway while some of them linger in the hall with one another in idle chat. It's busy for a Sunday morning.

When he makes it to the entry door of the guards quarters, the blue silk fabric of George's cape catches his eyes first and then the familiar pink hair of one of the other guards.

"You got a visitor finally, huh?" Techno blade smirks, having already been dressed in his armor. George stands in front of the fellow guard with what looks like a nervous smile, offering him a little wave.

"Looks like I do," Dream replies, pausing in front of the two. Techno looks him up and down for a moment before glancing back at George.

"Nice." Just like that, Techno is nudging shoulders with him, pushing him out of the way as he walks back down the hallway.

Letting out a breath he didn't know he was holding, Dream catches George's wrist carefully, pulling him out of the guards' quarters with him in one quick motion.

"What are you doing *here*," he asks a little sharper than intended. They stop a few feet in front of the door and Dream forces George to look his way. The prince pauses, mouth dropping slightly. He looks away from Dream, eyes settling on something in the horizon.

"I came to see you?"

"And the other guards in the castle just let you walk out like it was no big deal?" Dream's hand clutches George's wrist a little tighter after that. That wasn't the only question wracking his mind though. Why did George even want to see him? They had just met, and Dream was nothing but a guard to him; not a friend.

"Well, it was more of me sneaking out the bottom story window of my wing rather than asking if I could walk out the front door."

In that moment, Dream realizes he may actually have a *lot* more in common with George than he originally thought.

"I— Isn't that *my* job to keep you from sneaking out?"

"I don't know, Dream, you tell me."

They're silent for a moment, and Dream is all too aware of the contact between the two of them and how George is staring up at him with wide eyes. With a huff, he quickly lets go of George's wrist, shaking his head.

"Why did you come to the guard's quarters instead of waiting for me to show up?" He settles on questioning.

"I was coming to ask if you wanted to have breakfast with me," he said, all too innocently. "I remember you telling me none of the guards really eat with you so I thought I would."

God damn it, George.

"Okay," he gets out before swallowing the lump that's formed in his throat. "Maybe from now on you should send a messenger to fetch me. The other guards might get the wrong idea if you just show up alone."

"Wrong idea?"

"The wrong idea as in them thinking I did something wrong and you're here to reprimand me," Dream answers, remembering Wilbur's reaction just a few minutes ago. "Come on, let's get out of here before any more of them wake up and ask what *this* was all about."

Dream escorts George back to the castle only to hop through the same window he'd apparently escaped from in the first place. With an all too excited smile for so early in the morning, George leads him down to the kitchen, having him wait in the hallway.

"Bad, are you here?" George calls out before stepping into the kitchen. Dream's attention is stuck on the oh so clever nickname of "*Bad*" that he doesn't really catch whatever else is said.

A moment later, George is sticking his head out of the doorframe. "Do you like waffles?"

"Who doesn't like waffles?"

George seems to like the sound of that because he quickly hops back into the kitchen before returning with two platters in his hands.

"Thank you Bad! I'll see you later!"

"Have a good day, George!"

George is quick to extend one of the covered platters to Dream, who takes it with care. The tray is warm and he thinks he's already about to burst into tears just at the thought of eating a warm breakfast.

"Where are we going?" Dream asks as George takes off in front of him, both hands wrapped around his platter like a *child*.

"The garden."

For the first time in a really long time, Dream has a hot breakfast with someone to keep him company. It's a meal that has him feeling full for the first time since he'd entered this kingdom.

Dream finds himself trudging back to the guard's quarters just a little after the sun has fully set, feeling more tired and relaxed than he'd normally feel after a shift. It wasn't like he'd done much; true to George's word, his life wasn't all that fun.

The two had spent another day sitting in George's room reading.

It didn't take Dream long to decide that George was a good company to have around.

George is kind. During his time as a guard, he didn't meet a lot of *nice* figures. George was also funny, and he tended to make himself crack up over the smallest of things. He also reminded Dream of himself in some way.

Altogether, it was just an extra bonus that George was also nice to look at, but that was something Dream would only admit to himself because *of course*, a prince is going to be good-looking, that's like part of the job description.

When he makes his way into the guard's quarters finally, he doesn't bother to make dinner out of scraps. On his way out, George had insisted he take a few rolls before he left, and he did.

He makes his way down the elongated hallway and to the last room on the hall that he'd called his bedroom for the past four years. Sapnap and Skeppy were already situated at the ends of their cots, seemingly caught in conversation.

Not having the willpower to butt in, he made his way to the end of the room and changed out of his armor into his comfortable clothes, making a note in the back of his head to take a trip to the bathhouse tomorrow morning before his shift.

"So, did you get in trouble?" Sapnap questions first when he dives headfirst into his bed.

"No," he simply answers, pulling his sheets over him.

"Are you going to tell me what happened, or am I going to have to pull it out of you like pulling teeth?"

"He invited me to breakfast," Dream replied, his voice muffled by the stiff pillow stuffed in front of his face.

Both Skeppy and Sapnap hum at that in interest and it has Dream pulling the pillow over his face.

"Seems like the Prince has a liking to you," Skeppy points out.

"He was just being nice."

"I don't know about that," Sapnap laughs, "I don't recall him *ever* coming down here to fetch any of his other guards before."

That's that comment that causes Dream's sleepless night. It's *all* Sapnaps fault.

Things That Taunt

Chapter Summary

He felt compelled, after the events of the day, to finally admit to their friendship. While Dream, at the end of the day, was nothing but a guard to George, he could still be his friend; despite Sapnap's fears.

"I wasn't lying, about that part," Dream confesses, worrying the cold silver item between his fingers. "I think we're friends, George."

A small, yet timid, smile broke out on the prince's face.

All together, Dream guesses he gets about two hours of sleep that night. It was still all Sapnap's fault. He didn't have to make that comment. If he hadn't made that comment then Dream would have been able to sleep peacefully without second-guessing the prince's intentions with him.

Sapnap did have a point, he never recalled having one of the royals come to the guards' quarters to fetch their personal guard. It was unheard of.

Why did George even invite him to breakfast in the first place? He didn't have to, after all. They'd just met, George didn't owe him anything. Was it out of pity? Did he really feel that *bad* for Dream simply because he ate alone?

Or was he trying to be his friend? Did he try nestling up with his previous guards?

Word traveled fast around the guards. If he *did* try nestling up and being all buddy-buddy with any previous guards, Dream is almost one-hundred percent sure he would have heard about it by now.

Something wasn't adding up, and it was leaving a sour feeling in his stomach.

Royals weren't always that nice. *He* would know.

When the sun just begins to rise, Dream is the first guard to wake up. In a cold sweat, he gathers his belongings and finds himself sitting alone in the bathhouse with his head feeling all too heavy.

An hour later, Dream is making his way through the castle with his arms tucked behind his back. He felt more on guard today than he had in a good few years and he wasn't sure if he was supposed to blame the lack of sleep or the anxiety bubbling in his stomach for it.

The halls were barren, he noted, as he made his way to Prince George's wing. It must have been too early for the castle servants to be awake.

It doesn't take long to make it to George's tower with how fast he's walking. He felt like he was running on clouds this morning. At least he could blame the lack of sleep on that. When he makes his way up the staircase, he's expecting George to still be asleep. He's already prepared himself to stand guard in front of his door for a few hours awaiting his presence.

He's not prepared for the sight he sees.

Through the tinted distorted glass of his bedroom door, Dream can make out George's slim figure standing in the middle of the room pulling a shirt up and over his head. He pauses for a moment, throwing the shirt somewhere to the corner of his room before slipping on another shirt.

His silhouette is sleek and fluid-like his smile in the dawn. For now, he moves as if only a flowing outline of black, but Dream can already picture what he looks like on the other side, and he *hates* himself for it.

He watches the way George shifts just slightly, pulling more items of clothing from his bed. Just when he notices that he's changing his pants, he's quickly averting his eyes back down the staircase, choking out a breath he'd been holding.

He may be sleep-deprived but that was *no* excuse for him to be thinking the way he was right now.

God, get your head out of the gutter.

He takes a moment to compose himself—to steady his breathing and get his mind on the *right* track before he's knocking on George's door with white knuckles.

There's a pause and out of the corner of his eye, Dream watches as George's silhouette perks up. "Who is it?"

"It's Dream," he answers in the most monotone tone he can muster.

There are a few shuffles on the other side of the door before the glass is being drawn back and Dream is engulfed in the morning light.

George peeks his head out of the door first, his body following suit. There was a softness to his appearance, a kind of warmth married to a shyness. It had Dream catching yet another breath in the back of his throat.

"Good morning, Dream!" George greets him merrily, pulling back the doors more. "I'm surprised to see you awake so early."

"Good morning, your highness," Dream manages to get out, studying the open expression on George's face. He seemed happy and excited.

"George," the other is quick to correct before turning back into his room. "Just George, Dream. You don't need to continue on with the formalities."

Dream follows him into the room, noticing very quickly that the balcony doors were already open.

Don't tell me he changed with those open.

Whether it was the lack of sleep getting to him, or the fact that he could just *barely* pay attention to the other, Dream agreed to throwing the formalities with a hum of approval. With a smile, George just nods, returning to the edge of his bed to put his shoes on.

"Want to accompany me to the garden again?" George questions as he slips his right shoe on. "We can get breakfast in an hour or so."

"Sure."

George looks up quickly, eyebrows furrowed. "Is everything okay? You seem out of it."

"Yeah, I'm fine," Dream answers. He was fine, after all. There wasn't anything wrong other than

the fact his head felt like it was twelve feet underwater and he couldn't think straight. "I'm just tired, that's all."

"Are you sure?" George stands, stepping in front of him in just an instant, invading his personal space.

Too close. Too close. Way too close.

With a huff, he takes a step away from the prince, ignoring the heat that rushes to his cheeks. "I'm sure, let's just go."

George doesn't believe him; he can tell. While he doesn't come out and call his bluff, Dream can see it all in the wary gaze he sends his way before ushering him out the door.

"Some fresh air will do you good, I promise."

Today, George was forcing Dream to walk ahead of him, his fingertips pressed against his elbow where the two pieces of armor covering his arm remained separated. He could feel the warmth that radiated off George through the thin layer of clothing he wore under his armor. It left his skin burning in an unpleasant way.

It doesn't take the two of them long to reach the small castle garden where they had shared breakfast just the day before.

Dream makes it to the door first. He holds it open for George, who simply rolls his eyes before muttering a quick thank you.

It was surprisingly warm for an October morning. With the sun fully up now and not a single cloud in the sky, Dream basked in the heat, a content sigh leaving his lips.

"Already feeling better, I see," George chuckles from somewhere in front of him.

He nods back, opening his eyes just the slightest to see George standing in the middle of the garden, openly looking at him with a wide smile. "What's *that* look for?" Dream can't help but comment, his naturally flirtatious personality poking out through his tiredness. "You like what you see or something?"

"Stop it," George gasps. His tone doesn't hold any malice—he's chuckling, that wide smile still plastered on his face.

Dream wishes George wasn't so *damn* perfect. He wishes he could just think right today and get out of the stupid funk he'd thrown himself in. He wishes that Sapnap never made that comment last night pointing out the obvious.

He wishes George could just be some stuck up royal, but he wasn't. Instead, he was the sweet boy who was sitting crisscrossed in the grass of the royal garden with a shit-eating grin plastered across his face in front of him.

Dream hoped that that was all there was to George—just a sweet boy looking to make a new friend.

He *really* hoped that there wasn't more lurking just under the surface.

Dream doesn't remember it happening, but evidently, *it* happened.

One moment, he was sitting in the thick garden grass with George, listening to him talk about some book he'd just started before going to bed. They were laying in the middle of the quiet garden, heads turned up toward the warm sun rays that cast down onto them with a smile.

He'd stolen a quick glance at George. His eyes trailed over the sloping bridge of his nose before landing on his plump lips that were curved up as he spoke. He had remembered turning away quickly, turning his focus onto the now forming clouds above them.

The next moment, Dream felt two cold hands grab at the sides of his face that his mask had failed to cover.

"Dream. Dream, wake up."

To his surprise, he was not greeted by George's face. Instead, he caught Skeppy's eyes, feeling his friend shake at his face.

With a sharp breath, he was, quite literally, shaken back into reality.

"What're you doing here?" He questions, swatting away Skeppy's hands like pesky flies. Before he even gets an answer, he sits up and turns to his side where he remembered George laying beside him in the grass only to be met with nothing.

"Where is George—" Panic laces his voice and he can't stop it. The gears in his head were still turning, trying to rid his brain of the morning cobwebs that had made him a train wreck earlier that morning. He still wasn't thinking the straightest—in *both* ways. There was also the overwhelming fact that he was practically in charge of the prince's wellbeing until further notice and if he'd already lost him, he was definitely going to lose his job for sure.

"Chill chill *chill*," Skeppy stressed, crouching down in front of him to meet him at eye-level. "He just walked out with one of the cooks to grab breakfast. He's in good hands," Skeppy reassures him, patting him on his head.

"You don't know that," Dream chuckles. "For all you know, that cook could have been an assassin sent to kill him."

Skeppy erupts into a fit of laughter after that. "Really? *Bad* being an assassin? That's funny."

Dream remembers the strange nickname he'd heard yesterday morning. *Bad*. He was one of the cooks here, obviously, and seemed to be on both Skeppy and George's good side. He must have been a good guy, then.

"Anyways," Skeppy sighed, sitting down criss-cross in front of him. "What's *this* all about?"

Dream wants to play dumb, but he knows exactly what Skeppy is asking. He knows that his friend is referring to the weird morning visit that George had given the guards' quarters. He knows that he's referring to the fact that he'd gone out of his way to invite Dream, a mear knight, to breakfast with him.

He knows he's asking why the *hell* he'd fallen asleep in a *garden* with the kingdom's *prince* at his side.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he insists anyway, pulling himself to his feet.

"Dream—"

"Really, I don't know what you're trying to infer." He innocently raises his shoulders and hands, very thankful for the fact that his mask covered the absolute *terrified* expression he was sure he was sporting.

"Sapnap and you can talk about it then. Good luck with that." Skeppy pulls himself together, standing in one swift motion before readjusting his cape around his shoulders. "You know what he'd say about whatever *this* is."

Dream tries to ignore the irking feeling that prickles at his stomach after that comment.

Sure, Sapnap had joked about the prince being all romantic and buddy-buddy with him; but if that was the truth, he'd be *livid*.

Sapnap didn't have a good past with royals. He knew they couldn't be trusted. He knew that they'd only use people for their own selfish ways. He knew how manipulative royals could be when it benefited them and only them.

Dream understood where Sapnap was coming from all too well, and it left him feeling sick as he tightened his mask around his face, watching as Skeppy walked out with a bounce in his step.

A week comes and goes faster than Dream can count to five. The days seem to blend together, making his time in the castle feeling a lot longer than it truly had.

Dream's *weird* moments with the prince just keep coming. He tried not to think about it too deeply when he'd sit in the quietness of George's room alone with him. Tried to not let the thoughts eat away at him when they ate their breakfasts together in the morning. Tried to ignore every single red flag he noticed when George invited him to come and explore the library with him one afternoon.

George was being too nice. *Way* too nice.

Royals didn't act like this.

Deep down inside, he really had hoped he was just over analyzing things. This new position would of course bring him new stresses and maybe that was making him look at the situation funny.

Dream was nothing but George's guard.

George was just lonely, looking to make a friend.

That was all it was.

He kept trying to convince himself of that even when Wilbur spoke to him about Quackity, George's past guard. Turns out Quackity had been his guard for over four years and the two rarely spoke; George had kept him at an arm's distance.

He kept trying to convince himself it was nothing even when Sapnap started going on long spells every night about how he needed to be more cautious about George, that he needed to refrain from becoming friends, that he needed to start declining the morning breakfasts and hanging out in his room.

He even tried convincing himself it was nothing after one particular conversation he had with Tommy one night.

"Tommy, what do you usually do when you're on guard duty?"

"I stand outside of whatever room they're in and try to block out their bloody loud voices."

Right.

It was still nothing.

George was just friendly.

And it was becoming *really* hard to stop himself from becoming his friend.

Dream had gotten up rather early this morning. Today, George finally had something to do. It was in regards to his birthday celebration, something to do with picking out silverware settings and garments. It wasn't Dream's thing and if he had the choice, he'd skip it in a heartbeat.

But he didn't have a choice. It was his job, as Sapnap had put it the other night, to be "George's bitch," which entailed following the prince like a guard puppy.

It was a close enough analogy.

By the time Dream had finally changed into his armor and slipped out of the bedroom door, he heard one of the beds creak behind him. "Dream?" Sapnap's tired voice called out to him. "Leaving already?"

He turned around just the slightest, watching as Sapnap pulled himself from his sheets and stood abruptly.

"Don't want to miss out on breakfast," he replied just above a whisper, careful not to wake Skeppy who was still curled up under his sheets fast asleep.

Sapnap blinked at him twice with a sour face before he crossed his arms over his chest. "You're unbelievable."

"What?"

Here he was again, playing stupid. He knew *exactly* why Sapnap was mad, but he was willing to do anything to avoid the conversation and just leave already. They have had the same conversation every day for the past three days; Sapnap would remind him of the dangers that came with getting close with the royals, he'd deny ever wanting to get close with George, and that would be it.

It was getting repetitive and old, but he knew that at the end of the day Sapnap was just trying to look out for him.

Sapnap was quickly making his way across the room, stopping just in front of Dream with a huff. "I don't get you," he started, keeping his voice low. "You really think that Prince George is just being nice to you for the hell of it?"

"Yeah," he replied quite bitterly. He didn't like thinking that there was some alternative motive to George's kindness, but he *knew* that things weren't always in black and white, and he *knew* how easy it was to lie to get what you want.

But he didn't have to admit that if he didn't want to.

Sapnap took an abrupt step closer to him after that reply and he found his back hitting the doorway

faster than he expected it would. With his exposed fingertips gliding against the rough wood of the door at an odd angle, he felt sharp pains shoot through his pointer finger and thumb.

Splinters.

"Why do you have to be so damn—" Sapnap paused, noticing the way Dream had visibly curled in on himself. "What's *wrong*."

Pulling his hand away from the door, Dream inspected the tips of his fingers. To no surprise of his, several splinters had embedded themselves into him.

Sapnap examined his hand as well, the fight in him visibly leaving. With a careful touch, he wrapped his hand around Dream's wrist and pulled him down the hallway into the small med room on the other side of the guards' quarters.

Dream didn't fight him when he ushered him to sit. He didn't even say a word to him as he watched him grab a pair of tweezers from one of the cabinets and return in front of him.

Sapnap crouched in front of him, grabbing Dream's hand and pulling it into his own lap as he wordlessly plucked the splinters from his friend's hand.

"You drive me absolutely insane, you know that."

"You still love me, though," Dream couldn't help but joke.

Sapnap sighed, shaking his head as he pulled the last pieces of wood from his thumb. "You wish."

They fell into silence as Sapnap began working on his pointer finger.

"You should have breakfast with me."

Dream was caught off guard by the sudden offer. Sure, he and Sapnap had been friends ever since they became roommates, but they never really shared a meal before. It just wasn't their thing.

Deep down inside, Dream knew he was only offering because he didn't want Dream eating with George. He knew how Sapnap worked, and yet, he couldn't help but accept the offer.

Sure, the cold biscuits and gravy were nothing compared to the warm breakfasts that Bad prepared in the castle, but they still filled him just the same when he had Sapnap sitting beside him, happy.

He liked it when his friends were happy.

By the time he had finally made it to the castle, the sun had fully come up. He couldn't have been more than ten or so minutes late, but it was hard to tell when he no longer carried a clock with him.

He rushed through the long hallways, making his way to George's tower quicker than he normally would. To his surprise, George had been sitting at the bottom of the staircase that led to his room, a book hanging from his knee.

"Dream?" The prince got to his feet quickly, brushing the dust from his pants and leaving his book discarded somewhere on the floor. "Where were you earlier this morning?"

There's a worried crease between the prince's eyebrows that catches Dream's eyes. His lips are parted just the slightest, and he can't help but notice the small amount of whipped cream that is smeared on the corner of his cheek.

"You have a little something," Dream ignored his question, pointing to his cheek, "right there."

George paused before bringing a finger to the corner of his mouth and wiping away a good portion of the whipped cream.

"Still there."

More forcefully, he rubbed the side of his cheek again.

"*Still* there."

With an audible groan, the prince took both hands and rubbed his face so roughly that it left his cheeks red. "Is *that* better?"

"No, but it'll do," Dream jokes, smiling under his mask.

The prince groans once more, rubbing his face down more aggressively. "Don't joke with me, Dream! I can't be looking like a slob when we go to meet with the caterers."

He can't help but notice the frustration that's growing on the other's face quickly. "You got it the first time."

"*Really?*" George deflates dramatically in front of him, rolling his eyes dramatically. "You're the worst. First, you stand me up for breakfast, and then you lie to me! What's next, are you going to assassinate me?"

Dream can't help but wrinkled his nose in confusion. "That's one big leap. Do you just automatically assume everyone who tells a joke is an assassin?"

"*No,*" George drawls out, crossing his arms over his chest in a guarded stance. "Did you even eat this morning? We have to go soon."

"I did," he answers, thinking back to the cold and thick gravy he ate this morning. "I'm sorry I bailed on you. One of the other guards asked if I could have breakfast with them and I felt bad turning them down."

At that, George shoots him almost a sympathetic look. "Well, that's good to hear that you actually ate. Let's get going before we're actually late."

George leads him through the castle, once again that week. He tells them that they're meeting with the people who have been put in charge of his party planning in the east wing.

Their walk is long, but Dream doesn't complain, despite how much he wants to.

Dream doesn't pay much attention to whatever is happening in the middle of the room. He's off in the corner, alone, watching as the midday sunlight rays dance in the stained glass window above him.

"Will that be all for today?"

"It seems so! Thank you so much for meeting with us, your highness. Shall we schedule another meeting for next week? We will be tailoring you and whoever you choose as your guest for outfits."

"Make it for next Monday morning, please."

Out of the corner of his eye, Dream watches as the trio of women who George had been talking with for the past two hours exit the room with bundles of fabrics and plates tucked under their arms. He's tempted to let out a breath of relief, but he refrains.

"Ugh, that was so tiring," George complains from the head of the circular table. "I almost forgot how much I hated meetings."

Dream takes that as his cue to leave his corner. He makes his way over to the prince whose head is pressed against the table, humming in reply.

"I'm sure it was just as boring to partake in as it was to watch it happen."

George lifts his head with the smallest of smiles plastered on his face. "You really got the shit end of the stick, didn't you?"

"I signed up to be a guard, I don't mind sitting and waiting around all day," Dream comments. He knows there's much worse he could be doing with his life and he'd rather choose being a guard over anything else any day.

George tips his head. "Don't you get bored?"

"A little boredom never killed, now did it?"

At that, the prince raises his eyebrows with an affirmative hum. "Don't you ever wish you did anything *fun* though?"

"This is fun."

"You're weird." George wrinkles his nose. "I mean actually *fun*, like traveling or adventuring."

"Traveling and adventuring gets boring after a while too, just like everything else," Dream goes to point out, remembering his early days in training camps.

"I wouldn't know about *that*," George murmurs under his breath, "I don't leave the castle often."

"Does that... bother you?" Dream can't help but ask. "You know, not leaving."

He knows he shouldn't have asked. He knows where this conversation was going to go. He knows he should have just let what George said be—*but he can't*.

"Honestly?" George looked his way, and if Dream weren't wearing his mask, they would have been making direct eye contact. "It bothers me a lot more than I let on."

"I would do *anything* to leave the castle, even if it was just for a few hours."

George's stare felt bone-crushing; it left Dream's lungs feeling restricted. He wanted to desperately say he didn't understand where George was coming from, but he couldn't. He knew *exactly* where George was coming from. He could read the pain that plastered itself on the brunette's face clear as day, he could hear the *desperation* that laced his every word, he saw the way his eyes wavered for a moment over him before flickering towards the floor with hesitation.

"It's stupid to think that way," he was quick to say, "I'm sorry. Forget I said anything."

The prince's expression went stony cold *quick*, the tone of his voice turning into something that Dream couldn't decipher. He didn't like it. He didn't like how quickly the prince was able to mask his emotions like that. It reminded him of something he wanted to keep hidden in the back of his

mind until the day he *died*.

He knew that people only masked like that when they wanted *something* out of someone, and yet, he walked willingly into the awaiting trap laid out in front of him. Part of him hoped that George wasn't *trying* to do what he was thinking he was doing. He hoped George wasn't trying to use him as some scapegoat out of this castle. George wasn't like that.

George wasn't a royal brat.

He wasn't going to use him.

But history tends to repeat itself, doesn't it?

"Do you—" He paused, practically choking on his own words. What was he *doing*? Was he really about to offer to take the Prince out of the castle? How *stupid* was he?

This would be breaking guard code—he *knew* it would be. He knew that god forbid, if something went wrong, his head would be served on a silver platter to the king and queen in an instant; and yet, all the same, he knew what it felt like to *long* for freedom, to long for a breath of fresh air.

George's eyes flickered back up to meet his, his eyebrows raised with interest.

"Do you want to get out of the castle for a few hours?"

George blinked up at him *way* too innocently, as if he'd been expecting the question.

"Are you offering to take me?" He questioned all too quickly, a faint smile perking up on the ends of his lips. "Because if you are, I am not going to say no."

Dream should have known better.

He really should have.

"Yeah, I'm offering to take you," he answered with a steady voice. "We can sneak out tomorrow morning. The village is busiest on Mondays. We can blend in with the crowd better."

"You better be making a promise here, Dream."

"I am."

His heart was racing.

All he could hear was his frantic footsteps and his own heartbeat pulsing in his ears.

There were too many trees to avoid them all. Every few seconds he was half dodging trunks only for his other arm to get snagged on rough bark. It burned his exposed fore-arms but he couldn't afford to care. He would tend to it once he got far enough out.

With a huff of a breath, still mid-stride, he began to pull off the remainder of his torn coat, tossing its tethered pieces behind him. He knew that they'd lead a trail to him, but he had a head start. He could lose them; it's what he'd trained for his whole life.

The crossbow that had been attached to his belt was feeling heavier with every stomping step. If he couldn't shake him, he'd have to use it.

God, he didn't want to do this to him.

He never wanted to hurt him.

When another arrow came whizzing by the side of his head, only to land itself in a tree just a few inches away from him, he knew he had no other choice than to finally fight back. He gave them a good run. He gave them enough time to finally give up, but they were persistent.

It only took him a moment to scope out a tree that had a large enough trunk for him to hide behind. Diving into the freezing cold snow bank, he threw his back up against the trunk, his hands fumbling with the clasps of his belt.

"Clay!" A desperate voice called out from somewhere in the thickened woods behind him. "This isn't funny, you know!"

"Shut up," a feminine voice growled. "This is your fault. You gave him an inch of freedom and he ran with it."

"Minx, you know I never meant to—"

"Shut up! God damnit!" The girl screamed. She was loud enough that whatever remainder of birds that had hung around this long flew from their barren tree limbs, screeching in terror. "I know exactly what you were trying to do, and it's still your fault! Romance was never in the job description!"

"Don't be so harsh, Minx. You know it's not his fault."

Their bickering pauses, and Clay tries his best to ignore the heaviness that was starting to sink into his chest. He, instead, busied himself with rigging the crossbow, pulling it back as he peered around the trunk just the slightest.

Several yards away, he notices the trio that had chased after him. The woman with sleek pink hair is standing with her bow pulled, aimed towards the forest behind him. One of the men, who had an odd-looking beanie pulled over his head, had his sword drawn, looking over to the woman with a pleading look.

The third person in their party had no weapon drawn. He was vulnerable. A perfect target, whether Clay had attachments to him or not. All he had to do was land a good mark on one of them; that would slow their team down enough if it was a near-fatal shot.

He never wanted to hurt him.

He never wanted to kill him.

But when their eyes meet through the snow-covered tree-limbs, he knows what he has to do.

"Clayton!"

He doesn't waste a second; he gets to his feet, brings the bow to his face, and shoots. The bullet directly lands in his target's chest hard enough to send him flying back into the snow.

There's a horrifying crack of muscle and bone that tears through the forest, a murderous scream following not long after.

Crimson blood stains the once white snow, and he instantly regrets every single moment that

landed him where he was.

That Monday morning, Dream wakes up in a cold sweat with hands wrapped around his shoulders. "Dream?" A quiet voice he doesn't quite recognize in his tired state calls out. "Are you alright?"

It takes him not even a moment longer to tear his eyes open. His cheeks are cold and wet with what he presumes is tears.

It's been a while since he's had that nightmare.

Two different colored eyes are blinking down at him, one a sky blue and the other a golden color. George always had the prettiest eyes, he had to admit.

"I'm fine," he mumbles quickly, rolling his shoulders out to rid himself of George's hot grip. "Has the sun risen yet?"

"No, but it should be coming up soon."

Just like Dream had ordered him to do, George had snuck into the guard's quarters just before the sun could rise.

Looking around the dimly candle-lit room, Dream takes notice of the two other sleeping bodies in the room. As quietly as he can, he pulls the sweat-filled sheets from his body, pulling himself out of his bed with aching joints.

"Why do you *sleep* with your mask on?"

"None of your business," he quickly dismisses, nudging at the prince's limp arms.

He's dressed casually, wearing but a plain cream-colored button-up, black pants, and leather shoes. It surely wasn't an outfit that would grab anyone's attention, but just to be safe, Dream would be lending him one of his older cloaks.

He silently motioned for the prince to sit on the edge of his bed. "Let me get ready and we can get going."

George complies quietly, plopping himself down on the cricket mattress with a sour face. "Not so comfy now, is it?"

"I didn't even say anything."

"You didn't have to," Dream whispered before making his way across the room. "Your face said it all."

To his surprise, George doesn't have a reply. Instead, he turns to face the opposite wall away from Dream, giving the other privacy to change.

Dream didn't really think about the *new* and *foreign* company in the room as he quickly changed out of his night-time clothes and into his clunky armor. He was used to changing in front of the other guards by now, they all respected their boundaries at least.

If George had taken a few glances while he was getting ready, he surely didn't notice.

Pulling his own dark green cape on, he opened one of his forgotten drawers, pulling out a dark green piece of beaten up cloth that used to be his old cloak. Without a second thought, he threw it

across the room, giving a half-whispered warning before returning to his belongings.

George made a some-what squeaking sound behind him, but didn't say anything as he pulled the old and torn cloth over himself.

Throwing his head over his shoulder quickly, Dream took a moment to take in George's appearance. It wasn't anything special, it wasn't supposed to be. He was sure that the normal kingdom dwellers wouldn't be able to pick George out that easily, but he had to be certain that the prince's identity would be hidden well enough; for both of their sakes.

After just another moment of searching, he found an old pair of sunglasses in Sapnap's belongings. He couldn't remember ever seeing the other wearing them before.

He carefully examined them, noting that they were very well-tinted and pretty large. They would most likely hang loosely off of George's face, but they would do.

It only took Dream a moment to swoop back to his cot, grab George by the wrist, and pull him out of the room in silence. As they made their way through the elongated hallway, he stuffed the sunglasses into his hand and squeezed his knuckles.

"I'm surprised you followed directions so well," he whispered as they made it to the main room.

George gave him a questioning glance as he pulled his hand away and pulled the sunglasses onto the top of his head. "It wasn't that hard. It was only the last room anyway. I am surprised though, I didn't know you guys shared rooms? Were those two your friends?"

Dream rolls his eyes under his mask. The day had barely begun and George was already asking questions.

"Yeah, that was Sapnap and Skeppy. I'm pretty sure you met Skeppy the other day."

"Oh, right," George sighed as Dream pushed him out the front door and into the darkness of outside.

"The walk from here to the village shops should take until sun-rise, so get ready for a long walk, *princess*."

"I—" George started, confused. He quickly shook his head with enough force to make his glasses fall down his face, landing on the bridge of his nose. "*Stop it*, Dream. I'm not a princess."

"Sure you aren't. C'mon, let's get out of here before anyone wakes up."

To his surprise, George barely spoke as they made their way down the gravel paths and out of the castle boundaries. Sapnap's glasses were perched on top of his head as he scanned the dark area around them with a still expression.

It didn't take long for the sun to finally rise. They treaded down the gravel roads of Gantrick in carefully crafted silence, the castle behind them growing smaller and smaller.

"I'm surprised no one stopped us," George finally commented after what had seemed like an eternity.

"None of the night-time guards are ever alert, it was the perfect time to sneak out right under their noses," Dream pointed out, remembering the tired guards that would scuffle back into the guards' quarters right before his morning shifts in front of the kingdom gates.

He'd be lying if he said he didn't miss his old position. He got to spend the majority of his days outside, spending time with other guards that he felt comfortable around enough to drop the "sophisticated" persona he tried to maintain with George. It was failing, obviously, but it didn't seem like George cared all that much.

When they had made it to the roads that were just a few yards away from village market-square, Dream grabbed hold of George's arm, pulling him off to the side of the quiet road.

In the distance, they both could hear the bustling of the market-square. People were talking, kids were screaming, and carts were moving. It was a familiar sound to Dream, and a comforting one at that.

George looked interested in all the commotion, his attention lying just behind Dream.

"It sounds so *loud*," he whispered just under his breath.

"It only gets louder as the day goes on," Dream assures him before grabbing at both of his arms, forcing him to look at him.

George blinked up at him aimlessly, his lips slightly parted. In the cold October air, Dream watched as their breaths mingle together before dissipating in front of them. His pale cheeks were dusted with a light pink blush from the cold air.

It looked nice on him.

Without saying another word, he pulled the glasses from George's head and placed them gently on the bridge of his nose. With George looking pleasantly confused, he pulled at the cloak around his shoulders, pulling the make-shift hood over his head. His fingers lingered on the rugged fabric of the hood a moment longer than they should have, but neither commented when his hands dropped to his sides limply.

He was satisfied with how covered George's face was.

"No one will suspect a thing. Just try to keep your face covered."

"I could have done that myself, you *idiot*." His tone held no malice, and yet, his words took Dream back a bit.

"It was faster I did it myself." The excuse slipped easily through his lips as he turned on his heel and started back down the road. "Keep up."

George follows after him like a lost puppy. The two of them made their way down a couple more long roads before making one final turn that led them to the entrance of the marketplace.

It was an open area filled with at least a hundred different stands. The stands were placed so close to one another, practically taking up every inch of space in front of them. Most of the stands were covered with multi-colored tarps, others just simply open in the sunlight.

With the upcoming birthday celebration that would be happening in just two weeks from now, the townspeople had already started decorating. Lights were strung from stand to stand, garlands that reminded him of Christmas hanging from the tops of the stands.

While of course, the main celebration took place in the castle, the townspeople would still gather in rejoice for another year of health to the royal family members.

Dream thought it was weird, and yet, he had still attended each celebration since he had entered Gantrick.

At his side, George stood rather still. While he couldn't quite make out his expression, he could tell that George's mouth was open in a gaping motion. "There are so many people here," he whispered, turning his head up to Dream with a smile. "What's with all the decorations?"

"It's for the prince's upcoming birthday celebration," Dream answered, lifting his eyebrows under his mask in a humorous way. "I'm surprised *you* didn't know."

The brunette didn't reply as he turned his head back to the packed market-square. "I didn't think the towns-peopled like the royals all that much."

"They *adore* them," Dream remarks, honestly. "It's just the guards that hate them."

Awkward tension wavers between the two of them. He can't help but notice the way that George stiffens at the comment.

They don't stand in silence for long, as more people pour into the market-square and they're practically pushed into the moving traffic of the townspeople. Out of the corner of his eye, he watches as George is bumped into several times under the first stand's tent. A couple of people break a space between the two and George quickly looks up at him, pushing through several people before placing a hand on the back of his elbow.

"We're going to end up getting separated quickly if you aren't careful," Dream points out the obvious. George huffs, adjusting the oversized cloak around his shoulders.

"Really? I couldn't tell."

The two of them end up locking elbows as they make their way into the heart of the market square. It's not as uncomfortable as Dream thought it would be— walking with someone with linked arms. It's actually a bit comforting having George's warmth radiating at his side.

Every now and again, George pulls the two of them in front of a stand, looking at the neat trinkets laid across the tables. To his surprise, George seems more than intrigued with crystals and rocks, having already inspected a good portion of them that they had walked by.

Dream doesn't spend much time lingering on George's actions like he would usually do. Now that he'd broken the guard-code and taken the practically defenseless prince out of the castle, he had to be on guard.

His eyes lingered on the crowd around them, watching as people passed them without even batting an eye at George. He watched the shop-keepers carefully, making sure none of them had weapons at hand.

He was the only defense that George had, so he had to be on top of his game today if he didn't want either of them getting caught and possibly injured.

The two of them end up making their way through a couple of stands. At one point, George ends up trading a few pieces of gold he'd brought with him for a few white crystals he'd taken interest in.

"Look how *pretty* they are," George had cooed as he waved the crystals in front of Dream's face.

They glistened in the little rays of sunlight that had poked in between the stands. They were quite eye-catching, honestly, and he could see why George's attention had been caught by them.

"I've seen prettier, but—" Before he could finish his sentence, a familiar feminine voice called out his name so loudly it had him stiffening. George had quickly pulled the crystals away from him, his grip around his forearm tightening.

"Dream!" The voice called out again, and suddenly, people were parting in front of them.

Sure enough, standing just a few feet in front of them was a short woman with medium-length blond hair. She was dressed in a simple brown dress, a few flowers dangling from her fingertips.

He relaxed at the sight, recognizing her quite easily.

"Niki," he greeted calmly, a breath of relief escaping him. Niki was a good friend of Wilbur's. She had come around the guards' quarters a couple of times, offering to help clean and repair things. When she was done, she always left a beautiful bouquet of flowers in the main room.

She also manned one of the stands here where she would sell flowers and sweets. Almost every day he had paid her stand a visit, grabbing a few sweets before his shift began with Skeppy.

"What are you doing *here*," she questioned, her eyes flickering to George. "I haven't seen you in like, a week, nor have I seen Skeppy." She averted her gaze, meeting Dream's eyes once again.

"Our posts got changed," he explained, his grip around George's arm loosening. "We're both working inside of the castle now," he further elaborated. He's sure that George didn't miss the way Niki's face screwed up like she had eaten a whole lemon.

"*You?* In the *castle*?" She laughed so hard that some of the flowers she had been holding slipped through her fingers. "Wow Dream, stepping up in the world, are we? I could have re-called not that long ago you—"

He cuts her short, knowing *exactly* what she was going to bring up.

They had a conversation not long ago one morning when the townspeople had first started decorating. He had made an off-handed comment about how utterly spoiled royals were but honestly, out of all people in the world, he felt like he had a *right* to make the comment.

"Have I introduced you to my new friend?" He quickly changed the subject. At his side, George finally let go of his arm.

"No, you haven't," Niki replied, turning her attention back on George.

And so, his lying began. "He's a new guard. I thought I would take him around the village on my day off," he speaks calmly. Lying didn't come *hard*; it was rather easy, but that didn't mean he didn't feel bad about it.

"Have you picked out a name yet?" Niki humors, knowing how the guards around here worked.

"Oh—I haven't," George is quick to reply, picking up on whatever scheme Dream was trying to pull. "It's nice to meet you though!" He extended his hand towards Niki, who took it happily and shook it gently.

"It's nice to meet you too, mysterious man," she laughed, turning her attention back to Dream.

"Congrats on your *promotion*," she laughed, putting air quotations around the word promotion.
"What's your new position? *Door guarding*?"

He weighed out his options. If he didn't tell her the truth now, she'd end up hearing it eventually from Wilbur, and then he truly would be in some *deep* shit. It would be very suspicious if she found out he was lying—but, if he told her the truth, she'd be even more concerned why he was given a day off.

He decided the second was the best option. If Wilbur found out he was lying about his new position, he'd be concerned. It would make sense to keep it disclosed to the general public but not someone the guards considered a good friend.

"I wish," he laughed nervously, hoping it didn't offend George. "I'm actually a royal personal guard now?"

If Niki hadn't looked completely floored earlier, she did now.

"*Dream,*" she hissed through gritted teeth, taking a step closer to them. He felt George shift at his side, tucking himself behind his arm. "You said yes? What happened to all the *crap* you used to talk about—how you thought roy—"

Dream cuts her off rather quickly once again. "It doesn't matter anymore," he said sternly, "I didn't have a choice."

Niki shuts her mouth quickly, crossing her arms over her chest. "Who picked you."

It wasn't a question.

"Prince George."

Her expression changes drastically. "*That cutie?*"

He can't stop himself from laughing when she dramatically grabs him by the forearm, motioning for him to follow her. Turning over to look at George, he grasped the prince's hand, tugging him along after Niki.

"Guess you're lucky then, I've heard good things!" She exclaimed, not asking the question Dream had been dreading for her to ask.

"He's alright," Dream confesses, refusing to turn around. They make it to Niki's market stand rather quickly. She slips behind the stall, ducking under one of the cabinets.

"Flowers to celebrate, on me," she insisted, pulling out two circular containers filled with flowers. "What color?"

"Blue, please."

The color George can see.

In a matter of moments, she's extending a small bouquet of blue flowers, all of different shades, toward Dream. "Visit more often, okay?"

He takes the bouquet carefully. "Thank you, Niki, I will."

She waves them off rather quickly as people begin to walk up to her stall again. Easily, Dream finds himself wrapping his arm around George's as he tugs him down the path a little ways. They walk past several stalls before Dream finds a quiet space between two stalls and tugs George into the small alcove with him without warning.

"Woah!" George gasped as his arm. "What was that all about, with Niki?" Dream paused, watching as George pulled his glasses up.

"She can be weird like that," is all Dream says as he plucks one of the flowers from the bouquet. "She's not a fan of you know... The royals. I don't know why but she's always taken a liking to you. Said you gave her different *vibes* or whatever." George's eyes follow his movements, watching as Dream breaks the stem in half before presenting the flower to him.

"For you," he sighs before tucking the flower behind George's ear. The prince pauses, watching Dream's hands cautiously with dark eyes. The blue flower clashes with the green hood, but he doesn't pay much attention to it. The blue of the flower compliments George's eyes nicely.

Dream doesn't know *why* he did it, doesn't know what impulses told him that doing *that* was okay, but it was too late to retreat from the action.

George's eyes finally flicker back up to his mask, his eyebrows drawn down carefully. "Thank you?" He spoke, as if it was a question.

The sight before him brings forth a memory he hadn't thought about since he was seventeen, just a few weeks before he'd arrived in Gantrick.

It was when he was with *him*, sitting in one of the many fields of Gwent with the moonlight shining down onto both of them. They were quiet for a while before *he* shifted, suddenly sitting in front of Dream. A dark green flower stuck out between his pointer finger and thumb as he waved it in front of Dream, a smile that reminded him of his childhood lingering on his face. "*Sometimes, you remind of a dream; a dream that's waiting to come true.*" And with that, *he* placed the flower behind Dream's ear, his warm fingers grazing his cheek.

The memory had Dream faltering. He felt a tremor in his hand as he dropped it back to his side.

Crimson red blood flashed before his eyes— *snow a deep color of red.*

He felt like puking as he took a step away from George, his stomach lurking at the memories that swirled through his head.

George looked at him concerningly, dropping his glasses back to the bridge of his nose. "Dream? What's wrong?"

He shook his head.

George didn't need to know about his past.

"It's nothing," he insisted, rolling his hands into fists at his side. "Let's keep going."

For the rest of the day, he refuses to let his thoughts linger on the memories of his life before he became a guard. He knew that his nightmare was just faking him out. None of *that* mattered anymore; he wasn't the person he used to be anymore.

He didn't live *that* life anymore.

George seemed content after that as he happily tugged Dream along with him through the market stalls. He bought a couple more things too that Dream ended up carrying for him. There were two new books he had bought to add to his collection, a few oddly colored rocks that he *knew* George couldn't see, a dark blue and silver pendant, and a few hard candies.

An odd collection of items; but he didn't make any comments about it.

"Wait," George suddenly said from his side, pausing. He let go of Dream's arm, turning around just the slightest. "I changed my mind on something at the last stall—I'll be right back."

Before Dream can protest, he's already turning around through the crowd. He stays in place, stepping up on his tippy toes to watch as George rushed back to the stand they had just left. He kept his eyes on him carefully as George said something to the stall keep, exchanging something in his hands before turning back to Dream and making his way back in just a couple of moments.

A small leather pouch was clutched in his hand as he grabbed back onto Dream's arm.

"Want to head out of here and grab something to eat before we make it back to the castle?"

George nodded hesitantly. "I doubt the food would be any good—*no offense*—Bad makes the best recipes."

"Would it really be a day out of the castle without trying the commoner food?" Dream laughed, and George agreed with a sigh.

With that said, Dream brought George along with him to a place that he used to frequent before the whole "post-change."

Their lunch went well, Dream thought. He'd taken George to a small restaurant that wasn't overly packed and sat in a quiet secluded corner. Conversation didn't last long between the two of them, as George seemed too preoccupied looking out the window towards the busy streets of the kingdom.

They'd gotten a simple rabbit stew. It wasn't warm like the food inside the castle, but it was still filling all the same.

As they walked the quiet paths back to the castle, the sun still high in the sky above them, George plucked the sunglasses he'd been wearing off his face. "Thank you for today," the prince started, pausing mid step.

Dream stopped a few paces behind him, confusion lingering on his face. "It's no problem, really," he insisted. "I'm sorry we have to cut it short."

George turned to him, dropping his hands to his side with a huff. "A few hours is better than nothing, really. It means a lot you were willing to go through all of the trouble of sneaking me out in the first place."

Not really sure how to reply, Dream simply nodded, shrugging his shoulders. "I doubt being stuck in the castle all day is any fun," he guessed, remembering the first day he'd met George. A week ago today, the prince had been standing on his balcony, looking out towards his kingdom longingly.

George had erupted into laughter.

His laughter was so free and pure, so childlike despite his adult years. It had Dream stiffening, taken back when his rocky heart leaped in his chest.

"Sometimes, I feel like the princess who is waiting for their prince charming to come and break them out of their jail cell," George admitted through breaths of laughter. "It's such a *stupid* thought, but, all I can think about when I'm in the castle are those fairytale stories when the princess lets

down her *long* and *luxurious* hair for some knight to come and save her from her captivity." He paused, his head bowing as he fiddled with the glasses in his hands.

"I know other royals probably have it worse. At least I have the freedom to roam the castle as I please."

Dream, deciding to ignore the heaviness that came with the second statement, broke out into laughter. "Does this make me your prince charming, *George*?"

With a screwed up nose, George doubled over in laughter once more. As he composed himself, he chuckled slowly and warmly, reminding Dream of honey. "I think this makes you my knight in shining armor, actually," George finally replied, lifting his head to meet eyes with Dream.

"So that makes *you* my prince charming, then," Dream pointed out, quite fondly. "That doesn't sound too bad."

With another hum of laughter, George took a step closer to Dream, knocking their shoulders together softly. "I'd hope it didn't sound all that bad, I personally think I'm pretty cool, you know."

"Oh, aren't you just *full* of yourself," Dream cooed, pushing back at his shoulder and taking another step down the path. "You wish you were cool."

"I don't have to wish to be something when I'm already it."

"Who on Earth told you that you were cool? Your mom?" Dream could feel his natural humor seeping through his "*guard*" facade with every step closer to the castle's premises.

"You know what," George barked from behind him, sprinting down the path after him. "She did, actually! And she's pretty damn cool!"

With a simple shrug, Dream felt George's presence at his side once again. "I mean, she's the queen and all, so I *guess* by default she is cool."

With a huff of satisfaction, George fell in-step at his side with ease. The rest of their walk to the castle was quiet. For the most part, Dream's attention was set on the land around them, scanning for any possible "dangers" that could arise.

It was quiet around them; not the eerie type of silence that had you on edge, more of the comforting quiet that had you swaying in ease.

It wasn't hard to sneak back into the castle premises, thankfully. It seemed as if most of the guards had abandoned some posts. Normally, Dream would be the type to think that was irresponsible and would be putting the royals in danger, but right now all he could be was thankful as he grabbed onto George's arm and ushered him around the castle.

"Where are we sneaking back in?" He whispered to the prince as they shuffled around the castle walls.

"The window at the bottom of my tower," George replied through staggered breaths.

Dream simply hummed, urging George to run faster as they ran the entirety of the castle on uneven land. After what had seemed like a lifetime, they finally rounded the castle tower they were looking for.

The window was still opened, thankfully. Without saying a word, George was quick to bring

himself to the window first, pulling himself up and through the window with a surprising amount of strength. Once safely inside the castle, George turned to look out the window with a surprised look on his face, the hood of the cloak having fallen back to his shoulders.

Dream had a past of sneaking out and in of windows himself, so he hoisted himself up and through the window with ease, trying not to cringe at the sound of his armor scraping against the corners of the window.

As he settled his feet back on the ground, George was suddenly standing in his face. "We did it!" He whisper-yelled as he grabbed onto Dream's arms, giving them an enthusiastic shake.

Taken back, Dream stiffened under the sudden touch. "Yeah, we did," he huffed under his breath.

With a shit-eating grin, George let go of him, turning and making his way up the stairs with a bounce in his step. With the smug feeling of having been able to practically kidnap the prince from the castle for a day successfully, Dream followed the prince up the stairs with a smile.

The rest of the day after that went along without a hitch. It had seemed like no one suspected a thing, thankfully.

When they had made their way up to George's room, the prince had discarded the cloak under his bed after insisting it may look suspicious if Dream left with it in his hands. After that, George went on a *long* tangent about how *beautiful* it was out in the kingdom. Dream never thought the loud and crowded market-square was beautiful in any way, but he didn't make any comment about that to George. If he was happy, that was all that really mattered. That was the purpose of taking him out in the first place; to make him happy.

After dinner, and having endured weird looks from Tommy and Tubbo all night long, Dream escorted George back to his wing.

"Good night, *your highness*," Dream laughed, watching as an unimpressed George opened the door to his tower.

"You're so weird, you know that, right?" George shook his head, crossing his arms over his chest.

"Awe, c'mon George, you know you love it. You love me."

He was pushing his buttons, he *knew* he was, but nevertheless, he felt a welcoming wave of satisfaction at the pink hue that tinted the prince's cheeks after his comment. Even though he still looked quite unamused with his joke, George rolled his eyes, dropping his hands back to his sides.

"You're an *idiot*," George huffed before dipping a hand into his back pocket, "and to think, I got you a present and everything and now suddenly you're making *false accusations*."

With all of his confidence practically shattering into thousands of pieces in front of him, Dream watched as George pulled out the small leather pouch he'd remembered him running back to retrieve.

"You got me something?" He sounded more confused than he did surprised, because he *was*. Why was the *prince* getting *him* gifts?

Looking up at him through half-lidded eyes, George handed him the pouch. "Take it as payment, for today," he started, his eyes flickering away from his. "I doubt you meant it when you told Niki we were friends and all, but I still thought it would be nice to get a *friend* a present as well. I saw it at the last stall. I hope it's the right color, it looked like it was the same shade as your cloak and the

shop person did say it was a dark green, but if they lied it is *not* my fault."

George almost looked guilty as Dream took the pouch, but he refused to read much into it.

With hesitant fingers, Dream pulled open the pouch to reveal a silver brooch in the shape of half a circle. Gems of white decorated the circle as a sword made of emerald pierced through the middle.

It was beautiful.

Dream was left speechless. He couldn't remember the last time he'd received a gift, let alone such a *nice* one. Looking up, George was staring at him with wide eyes, his bottom lip worried under his top teeth.

He felt compelled, after the events of the day, to finally admit to their friendship. While Dream, at the end of the day, was nothing but a guard to George, he could still be his friend; despite Sapnap's fears.

"I wasn't lying, about that part," Dream confesses, worrying the cold silver item between his fingers. "I think we're friends, George."

A small, yet timid, smile broke out on the prince's face.

"Thank you for the gift, seriously. This is probably the nicest thing I've gotten in a while, it looks *wicked expensive*," he hissed out his last words, studying the brooch carefully.

"I'm glad you like it. It was no problem, getting it for you. I have the money to spare, you know."

He wasn't sure what exactly compelled him in the moment to take a step forward and close the space between them, but he did it. He swept the prince into a short-lived, and frankly awkward because of his armor, hug.

With quick fingers, he pinned the brooch to his cloak.

"How does it look?"

"Quite dashing, if I'm being honest."

When The Truth Spills Like Fine Wine

Chapter Summary

He throws the sheet back down with wide eyes. There was no way the prince left.

He turns around abruptly, scanning the rest of the room with his heartbeat pounding in his ears.

There, sitting on his desk, is a single piece of paper.

Chapter Notes

hi guys :)

i just want to make a little reminder that I post more frequently on wattpad. both versions, here and on wattpad, have the same text! however, I do post 2k long chapters on wattpad 2-3 times a week. if you're looking to keep up with the story quicker instead of having to wait for the longer updates here, my wattpad is darlingsdream!

with that said,,, enjoy!

His walk back to the guards' quarters was a quiet one. He watched in absent thought as the sunset just beyond the mountains, streaking the sky with hues of purple and pink. His bones burned with tiredness, but nevertheless, he felt relaxed.

After some time he found his fingers tracing the brooch over his heart. It was cold still, the gems feeling foreign under the pads of his fingers. He couldn't help the smile that curled onto his face.

He didn't own any personal possessions that weren't related to his uniform, as he'd discarded them long before becoming a guard. His fellow guards had a fair amount of personal possessions, whether it be family photos, items of jewelry, or even pieces of fancy clothing for special occasions.

He never thought it was importng investing his money for his own selfishness, as most of his saved up money went to buying items the guards needed.

His hand fell limply from the brooch as a soft, yet pleased, sigh escaped his lips.

He hadn't gotten a gift from someone in a very long time. Sure, Skeppy and Sapnap always got him small things, whether it was a piece of warm food, buying him lunch, or even helping pitch in to buy new linens for his cot. He appreciated the two of them very much, but it was never like they had gotten him something so *permanent*.

Having been lost in thought, Dream hadn't caught onto the telltale signs of footsteps behind him. He hadn't even caught onto the fact someone was following him until he felt a solid weight press *hard* against his back, throwing him to the ground.

His elbows hit the gravel first. His instincts finally kicked in as his chin scraped across the staggered rocks. A shaky hand reached for his hip, grasping at the hilt of his sword. With trembling legs, he kicked his assailant as hard as he could, surprised when they barely moved off his back.

Panic was quickly settling in his chest as he felt knees dig into his sides painfully.

Using as much force as he could, he twisted under the assailant's weight, the back of his head hitting the gravel with enough force that caused his vision to sway in front of him.

There, straddling his lap was the *last* person he'd expected to have attacked him.

"Sapnap?" His voice sounded *wrecked* and through his distorted vision, he could tell his mask was no longer on his face correctly. Warm liquid was flowing down from his chin to his neck, his nose burning.

Sapnap from above him looked down upon him with a look of utter *disgust*. His cheeks were covered with soot, his hair stuck to his forehead with sweat.

"You're the dumbest piece of shit, you know that?" Sapnap's voice was emotionless, so stony cold that it sent shivers through Dream's spine.

"What the *fuck*, *Sapnap*," Dream hissed back, his tone dripping with venom. His hand tightened around the hilt of his sword with an unsettling feeling of anger and fear mingling together.

What the absolute fuck. Why was his *friend* attacking him? Was Sapnap turning on him or something?

"I didn't mean to hit you that hard, idiot," Sapnap hissed at him, his hands grabbing onto either side of his face. The touch burned. Pulling his hands from his sword, he swatted at Sapnap's hands.

"Don't touch me," he warned, his fingers latching around the other's wrists.

"I'm fixing your mask."

They sat there on the ground for a moment longer as Sapnap readjusted his mask correctly over his face, his hands quickly leaving as Dream shoved him off him.

"What the fuck was that for?" He hissed, sitting up.

"Skeppy told me you and George never showed up for breakfast," Sapnap started from on the ground across him. "He told me he searched around the castle for you two. He came and found me earlier this morning asking me to go find you because he *knew* something was up."

They sat there in silence, Dream's heart *pounding* in his ears.

"What do you *mean* he knew *something* was up?" His tone was cold, but he didn't care. What right did Skeppy have to just *assume* "something" was up? What right did Sapnap have to just blatantly attack him for no reason?

Sapnap pointed an accusing finger at him, his voice rising dangerously. "You took him outside of the castle, didn't you?"

"I *didn't*," he lied through his teeth, his voice holding the same bite as Sapnaps.

"Stop treating me like I'm an idiot. I'm trying to *help* you, what don't you get! I don't want to see your ass getting kicked out of the kingdom for treason or something!" Sapnap yelled desperately at

him. "You know exactly what happened in the kingdom of Gwent with that selfish prick of a prince! Do you want to be the next guard that's trialed for treason and become just another passing story?"

Anger flooded his system. Adrenaline flooded his system, every muscle in his body flying into the fight or flight response. The anger in him was boiling deep in his system as hot as lava, and it was starting to spill out.

"*Shut up,*" he warned, his fists curling at his sides.

"No, I don't think I will," Sapnap challenged back with a crimson tinted face. "You've known the prince for a *week* and suddenly you're his beck and call? You're constantly all over him."

"It's my *job!* I'm his guard!" He pleaded, willing the fire in his system to cool with no avail.

"Tommy and Tubbo are royal guards too, but you don't see them sharing breakfasts with the king and queen, hanging out in every room with them and helping them *sneak out of the castle* to go to a stupid *market-square!*" Sapnap's voice boomed around them, echoing. Anyone in at least a miles radius of them could definitely hear them, but it didn't seem like any of them cared to face the facts here.

"Where's your proof that I supposedly took George out of the castle?"

"Prince George," Sapnap corrected harshly. "I told you Skeppy asked for me to go find you, so I went searching. I bumped into Niki at the market-square an hour or so ago and said you showed up this morning with some new mysterious guard, and I *know* you were supposed to be with George today."

He paused mid tangent, eyes traveling from Dream's mask to his chest where the brooch laid pinned crookedly. "Let me guess, he bought that for you, right? Is that *not* the first sign of manipulation?"

He was frozen like a deer in headlights. There was no way he could get around the clear fact that he did actually take him out of the castle. But, that didn't matter to him anymore as the thought of George manipulating him *once again* floated around his brain.

"You're going to end up like that guard from Gwent," Sapnap taunted, "what was his name? *Fundy?*"

The lava that had been boiling in his system finally *exploded* as he sat up and punched his fist hard enough into the gravel for it to make a disgustingly crunchy sound. Sapnap flinched, eyes widening just the lightest.

"Shut up, you have no idea what you're talking about!" Dream screamed, his voice cracking as hot tears began to spill down his cheeks. He wasn't sad, he was *angry*. The type of anger that evoked ugly rage. The type of anger that caused tears to form unknowingly. "You're blowing this way out of proportion, you know that?"

"I told you I didn't mean to hurt you," Sapnap growled back. He was red in the face, like the color of an over-ripe tomato, red as a brick, eyes squinting meanly. "I know you Dream, and whatever *this* is," he motioned to him with a shaky hand, "isn't the guard I know. What happened to you hating the royals? You literally *preached* about the spoiled rotten royals and how stuck up they were. Why are you suddenly changing your mind? Because a pretty boy came along?"

He paused, gulping in deep breaths.

"He's just using you. Imagine how lonely it must be in the castle. Imagine the entire weight of a kingdom sitting on his shoulders. He probably wants out like that Gwent prince did, and if you're going to be his accomplice to his escape I don't want *anything* to do with you."

"He's *human*, do you really think anyone would be happy sitting around in a castle all day with no friends and a brick load of responsibilities on their shoulders?" Dream bitterly bit back. "He just wanted some damn *fresh air*, is that really such a crime?"

"He's a *spoiled brat*, he has everything he could have ever wanted at his fingertips—he has all the money in the world, he has hundreds of servants at his fingertips, and thousands of 'followers.' Not to mention the kingdom people have been working for *weeks* on his upcoming birthday celebration. How bad can his life really be, Dream?"

Silence washed over them again as tears spilled down Dream's cheeks. The salty liquid slipped down and through the cuts on his chin, stinging the wound.

"Don't do it again. You're going to regret being all buddy-buddy with *him*. I'm trying to keep you safe, Dream. I really am."

That night, he finished his walk back to the castle bitterly, unable to stop the tears that streaked down his face. He wasn't sure if it was the fact that his nose was possibly bruised or if he was still seething with anger, but he didn't care. None of the guards spoke a word to them as the two bruised and bloodied guards walked back into the guards' quarters, parting ways almost immediately.

Dream made his way to their bedroom, ignoring Skeppy's presence entirely as he grabbed a pair of nightclothes and promptly left the quarters to make his way down the small path to the empty bath house.

He rubbed his cut up and bloodied hands raw. He burned his skin in scalding hot water, hissing in pain as his bruised elbow and neck slipped into the water. He scrubbed his scalp with sharp fingernails, reveling in the pain.

He cried until his throat was raw and scratchy, he hated to admit it. There really was no reason for him to cry, but it was so hard to not mourn his life before becoming a guard. He hated the empty and hollow feeling that had been left in his chest ever since he'd become a guard.

He hated the way George seemed to fill that hole.

For the first time in a really long time, Dream didn't shove his mask back over his face the second he pulled himself from the bath. Drying himself off, he dressed himself, numbly walking over to the foggy mirror in the corner of the room.

He hadn't remembered looking at his reflection since he was knighted as a full-time guard, but he knew the second his face came into view that he was still the same person he was trying to run from all those years ago.

His eyes first gravitated to the wound on his chin, which had already started scabbing. It wasn't as bad as he'd thought, thankfully, but it was as equally noticeable as it was painful.

Pulling his attention away from the wound, he took himself in as a whole.

None of his facial features had changed after all this time. His emerald eyes were ringed with red, however, his lips chapped and slightly bruised; but the constellation of freckles that littered his cheeks were still the same, his cheekbones still sharp and prominent. As his eyes followed the curve of his cheekbones, he couldn't help but notice the one feature he didn't recognize.

There, just above his right cheek, was a small slither of raised pink skin. His fingers traced the scar mindlessly as echoes began filling his head.

The sound of ribs breaking. The color of red as it stained the once white snow. The sound of a cry that kept him up every night. The eyes of a madwoman as she pulled her bow and let her arrow find its target. The sight of blood fogging up his vision as he ran. The burning sensation as the newly branded cut on his face peeled open.

He couldn't stop the bile from rising in his throat. With white clenched fists, Dream found himself standing back outside of the bathhouse spilling the contents of his stomach onto the grass.

He had no one to blame for how he felt right now but himself.

He wasn't supposed to be here.

He never belonged here in the first place, after all.

"Clayton!" The woman's voice was painfully brutal to listen to.

He can't move. His muscles are refusing to budge despite the fact that he knows he should be running right now.

He can't breathe. His mouth is hanging open, his nose scrunched up as the metallic smell of blood protruded around the forest. His chest was hurting so acutely that he faintly thought he must have been having a hard attack.

The man with the beanie was already on the ground, yelling something over the bloodied body, tears coming down his eyes. There were tears rushing down his own eyes. It was a perfect shot right over the heart.

There was no way he was going to make it.

Bile rose in the back of Clay's throat as he dropped the crossbow in his hands. He'd never hurt someone before, let alone killed someone. He watched in agonizing pain as the unfamiliar man pressed his gloved hands over the other's chest with force, screaming for help.

"You're dead."

The woman, who'd been referred to as Minx, was rushing toward him through the snow with her bow already strung, an arrow pointed at him.

The thought of running didn't register fast enough in his head, his eyes still trained on the limp body in the red snow.

He'd caused that.

He really shot him.

The one person who was willing to do so much for him was there, laying in the cold snow, bleeding out on his behalf.

He thought about dropping the crossbow and running over there himself. Thought about sprawling his own body over his in a heap of tears. Thought about whispering apologies into his ears as he lifted him from the snow and ran him back to the safety of their kingdom.

It was too late, though. His decision had already been made; he had to get out of here, as far away as he could manage before he collapsed.

He faintly heard the man with the beanie shout something before he realized the arrow from Minx's bow was coming straight for his head.

He tried dodging it the best he could, diving to his side, but he failed as the arrow grazed his right cheek.

Pain. Burning pain.

The sound of skin tearing echoed in his ears. He barely collided with the snow before he was pulling himself up and running full force in the opposite direction from Minx.

"His blood is on your hands, you son of a bitch!" She screamed from somewhere behind him as another arrow grazed the back of his neck. "I hope you freeze to death out there!"

He ran as far and as fast as he could with only the image of his beloved friend's body lying there in the snow.

He was an awful person.

A damn traitor.

He woke up that Tuesday morning with a gasp, shooting out of his bed. Everything burned and ached, from his chin to his shoulder to his nose. His mask sat uncomfortably against his nose enough to make it ache.

For the second time that week, he woke up with tears in his eyes.

From the way the sun was shining into the room, he could tell it was at least an hour past when he'd usually wake up. Out of the limited peripheral vision his mask gave, he could tell both Sapnap and Skeppy were already getting ready, having stilled when he woke.

Without much thought, he faced the wall away from them and pulled his mask off; something he would *never* do.

He wiped the tears from his eyes hurriedly, willing whatever remnants of his food from yesterday to stay down at the memory he re-lived once again.

The pain in his nose was finally relieved without the pushing of his mask. He faintly thought about just *not* wearing it, but there was no way he could just do that. He had to keep his identity a secret even if it meant being uncomfortable.

First thing first though, he had to make sure if his nose was broken. Last night it had looked fine in the mirror back in the bathhouse, but the pain he felt in the current moment was a lot worse.

He thought back to the two guards sitting behind him. There was no way they'd recognize him, he knew that for a fact.

Despite the anger that swelled within him with what they'd pulled yesterday, he understood where they were coming from. At the end of the day, they were still his friends and he trusted them.

They were right.

He had to be more careful with George if he didn't want to end up, yet again, another passing story.

With a staggering breath, Dream stood up from his bed and glanced over the side of his shoulder just enough to give the two of them a good side view of his profile. The both of them were already looking at him, shock written on their faces.

They had never seen what he looked like before.

Dream turned quickly, making his way to the other side of the room, shielding his face as he did.

"Dream," Skeppy started from behind him as he began rummaging through his things, looking for the broken mirror he owned. "You're— uh... You're going to be late."

"No I won't be," he replied briskly when his fingers finally found the shattered piece of mirror. "I'll be just on time for my *job*." He didn't mean to purposely oversleep, he really didn't, but in the end he knew it was for the best.

Guilt swarmed in his gut.

"I think we're friends, George."

He angrily bit down on the inside of his cheeks as he brought the small shard of mirror in front of his face, inspecting his nose. Sure enough; it was bruised a bright purple. The underneath of his eyes were stained black and blue. He touched the bridge of his nose hesitantly, deflating when he realized it was only slightly swollen and it didn't feel out of place.

He didn't look like himself, not like how he did last night.

His face was blotchy, the wound on his chin having fully scabbed over grossly, both his nose and eyelids swollen to a good extent.

Hell, if he'd walked out right now in broad daylight and flaunted himself in front of every single citizen in this damn kingdom, he doubted a single one of them would recognize the person he used to be.

He groaned, throwing the shard back into the pile of his belongings.

"Are you okay, Dream?" Sapnap hesitated to ask.

He turned abruptly, shaking his mask in his hand. "Does it *look* like I'm okay?"

The two of them looked at him with wide eyes, neither of them saying anything. A small huff of laughter escaped him as he shook his head.

"I'm sorry," Sapnap blurted out, flinching at his own words. "I didn't mean—I didn't mean to hurt you *that* badly." He both sounded and looked sincere as he stared openly at him, his shoulders tense and his hands folded into fists.

"It's okay," he quietly insisted, rolling his eyes out of habit. "At least you got through to me."

Running a bandage wrapped hand through his hair that had been soaked with sweat, he returned his mask back over to his face, flinching when the hard plastic of the mask came to rest against his nose.

He pulled his hair out of the small bun he'd put it in the night before, pulling it back up and retying it so it felt looser and didn't tug at the skin at the back of his neck which was sore at the moment.

"I'm going to get ready," he announced to no one in particular as he gathered his armor, willingly leaving his cloak in its rightful place in his dresser.

He didn't need its reminder today.

The moment his bruised knuckles met George's door it came swinging open, a disheveled prince greeting him. His hair was sticking up in different directions in several places, his eyes lined with dark circles. He was already dressed, so he knew he wasn't just waking up, but either way he still looked rough.

"*Dream*—" George was quick to cut himself off as his eyes trailed down Dream's mask down to his exposed chin. "Dream," his tone fell dangerously serious now as he took a step closer to him, "what *happened*."

"*Nothing*," he was quick to hiss out, stepping back. "It's none of your business."

Something flashed across George's face that drew him back even more. He couldn't decipher if it was anger or confusion, but George was suddenly *right* in front of his face.

"You're hurt." George's eyes flickered up to the makeshift holes in his mask. "As your friend, I want to make sure that you're okay." His tone held something Dream couldn't decipher either and it left a cold pit in his stomach.

Guilt welled in his chest. Of course, George was going to throw the friend card in his face.

He shouldn't have said they were friends last night.

God damnit.

A half-strangled breath escaped him as his defenses rose into action. "It doesn't matter. It doesn't involve anything that is going to hurt you."

George took another step closer to him and he instinctively backed up. Fingers wrapped around his bandaged hand and as he looked down, he saw George's fingers tenderly pulling his hand up to his face.

"Sure looks like something I should be worried about, though." The calmness that George's tone usually held was rolling back slowly as he forced Dream's hand to stay between the two of them. "Where's your cloak?"

He turned his head distinctly. "I didn't want to wear it today."

His thoughts ran back to the beautiful brooch still attached to it. He was still thankful for the gift, but he just couldn't shake the way Sapnap had looked at it as if it was a manipulation tool.

Maybe he was right.

Maybe he was wrong.

As George took yet another step closer to him, he was pushed up against the railing of the staircase. George dropped his hand finally, placing both his hands on the railing on either side of him, trapping him in between his arms.

He was so close now—*so damn close* that Dream could smell whatever shampoo he'd washed with.

As George's arms brushed up against his own, he wished he could feel the full extent of his body heat against his, but his armor prohibited that. Instead, he felt a slight warmth envelope on his body. He cringed at the thought of craving someone else's body heat, especially George's.

But, there he was, leaned up all against him. He was looking up at him through thick eye lashes, his eyebrows furrowed. From this close, Dream could make out the very light freckles that kissed the bridge of the prince's nose. He couldn't help but think that even at this angle, he was nothing but attractive.

"Tell me what happened," George whispered darkly, "I'm ordering you to as your *prince*."

Something curled in his stomach at George's tone, washing away the cold pit that had once been there and replacing it with an uncomfortable warmth. Dream refused to meet his eyes again, looking down to the floor where George's feet stood steadily in between his own.

"I told you, it really doesn't matter—"

There were two hands on either side of his face where his mask didn't cover it. Thumbs traced against his cheekbones, fingers resting just under his ears. George's touch was warm, so warm that he immediately found himself melting under the touch.

His touch didn't burn the way Sapnaps had the previous night. Sapnap's touch had been rough and quick while George's was slow and steady. It was warm and comforting as his thumbs hesitantly rubbed circles against his cheeks. George looked concentrated as he focused on the wound against his chin, his slightly chapped lips parted.

"*Tell me.*"

And suddenly, he was spilling all the details from that previous night with ease.

"I was attacked by one of the guards when I was leaving the castle," he started off slowly, watching as George's expression changed. "Some of them found out about us being missing from the castle and went looking for us. A friend of mine attacked me out of anger, preaching about how I need to be more careful with you."

He watched as George processed the information.

"You're hurt because of me?"

"I'm hurt because I should have listened to my better judgment and never taken you out of the castle," he replied hastily. "You could have been in serious danger."

Frustration flooded the brunette's face. "That still makes it my fault, doesn't it?"

"No. I was warned before to be more careful with you." He swallowed awkwardly, watching George's eyebrows screw up awkwardly.

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Interpret it in whatever way you want," he suggested, pulling George's hands from his face. "I can't take you out of this castle again. It was a mistake."

He wasn't sure how he'd expected George to react, but it definitely didn't entail getting a door slammed in his face.

"I'd be happy for you, wherever you end up," a voice speaks to him earnestly from his side, their tone oozing with so much admiration that it has him crawling in his own skin. He couldn't do this, he thought. He couldn't wreck this person.

"I know you're not happy here. These past four years I don't think you've ever been happy."

He's suddenly standing by his side, his guard's helmet tucked under his arm protectively. "You don't deserve it; the way they've treated you with your eighteenth birthday coming up. Just because you're turning eighteen doesn't mean your life is suddenly over."

"It feels like it is," he answers too quickly, his heart clambering to his throat. "They're going to lock me up in here until it's convenient for them. It's not fair— it's not fair, it's not fair—"

He's gasping over his own words, his vision suddenly swaying. He could feel his fingers and toes tingle as his knees buckled under the single thought of never escaping the four walls that surrounded him ever again. His fingernails are suddenly digging into his palms as warm tears slip in and out of his vision.

"I don't want to be here anymore," he says through a staggered breath. "I don't want to be here when they lead this country into war. I don't want to be the cause of so much hatred and unneeded destruction— please— please just—"

Soft hands cradle around his own, slowly prying his fingertips from his palms with care. His touch has always been so calming and sweet; so soft and mundane. A touch that was familiar from his childhood years that always soothed his worries.

He wished he could comfort him sometimes in the same way; wished he didn't need to worry about the immense pain he was about to bring his way. He didn't deserve it, not him. It didn't matter if he'd never feel the same love for him as he knew he did for him. He didn't carry a torch of emotion in his name, but he still cared for him.

"Breathe, Clay. Just breathe." His words soothe over him like a calm ocean wave. "You couldn't even hurt a fly if you wanted, I get it."

Blood.

His blood.

"You're not a bad person, you never could be," he comforts him, lacing their fingers together. His own hands are shaking and it takes him a moment to realize he's reopened the wounds on his hands, causing blood to seep through their interlocked hands.

He doesn't seem to care though; he never cares about that stuff when it comes to him.

"You're not like your parents, you don't have to be. You know that, right?"

"That's what they expect of me, to be their little carbon copy— that's what everyone here expects of me. I'll never be free if I don't get out of here— I'll always be their little puppet, please—"

He's wrapped against another body of warmth in seconds, his head cradled against his chest protectively.

"I don't expect that of you, you know. I just want you to be happy, Clay."

He sobs until his throat hurts, sobs until both of their shirts are covered in tears, sobs until he

finally makes the decision that he can't stay here anymore; and he won't. He makes the decision that night to leave and leave him behind, despite him being the only thing to have tied him to this Earth so long.

He makes the decision a week later to kill him.

The only person who was ever there for him.

Dream sways in front of George's bedroom door, his fingernails digging into the cotton of the bandages covering his palms. Blood seeps through the once white bandages, but he can't help but shake the nervous tick of his. It's been about two hours now and George has refused twice to open his door. It wasn't like Dream had any intention of staying in his room today, especially after his conversation with Sapnap the previous day, but he would still appreciate some information about what the *hell* that was all about.

He couldn't wrap his finger on why exactly the prince had trapped himself into his room. Did it offend him that he said he wouldn't take him out of the castle again? Was he overwhelmed with the fact that he'd gotten hurt?

It didn't make sense; it didn't add up.

There was something along these lines he wasn't reading into. There was *no* reason for George to be so prominently ignoring him now.

Frustration prickled at his skin, but he was soon pulled from his thoughts when he heard footsteps trailing up the tower. With a finger dragging over the handle of his sword, Dream peered over the railing of the staircase only to be met with the curious gaze of the royal advisor.

"Dream," he'd greeted ominously. Dream never remembered catching his name, but they had several interactions since he'd become a guard.

"Hello," he returned carefully, hand slipping from the handle of his sword, "Is everything okay?"

"It's good to see you again." He ignores his question as he finishes his way up the stairs, seemingly out of breath. His eyes glance to the closed door of George's room before they fall back onto him. "How are things going so far?"

"Everything has been just fine," he speaks softly, watching the royal advisor's gaze shift down to the lower part of his face.

"Did something happen?" He questions hurriedly, causing Dream to bring up a defensive hand.

"Nothing to do with the prince," he reassures, "I tripped on the gravel one night going back to the guard's quarters. I forgot a lantern."

The advisor seems to take his word, pushing that issue aside as he pulls a crumpled scroll from his pocket. "That's good to hear, I suppose. I wish you all the best on your recovery," he pauses, clearing his throat, "I'm here to inform you of Prince George's itinerary for tomorrow. He will be having his final fitting tomorrow. It's requested that you are fitted for something nice as well, so it is recommended you don't wear your armor."

Dream pauses, taken back by the sudden suggestion of *him* getting fitted for clothing as well.

"Pardon me," he buts in, confused. "You mean his guard has to wear something nice? Shouldn't I

be on duty protecting him for his birthday celebration?"

"Someone will take your place on guard duty. His highness requested that you were present at his party, as a guest."

Dream stares through his mask at the man like he'd grown a fifth head.

"When did this happen?" He asks kindly, hoping it doesn't sound accusing.

Sapnap and Skeppy were *not* going to like the sound of this.

"Last night he informed us that he wanted to make changes to the guest list," the advisor answered peacefully. "Did he not inform you of this?"

"No, he didn't," he replies curtly. "Thank you for informing me. When is the fitting?"

"An hour after the sun has fully risen."

Dream only nods in reply, giving the advisor a wave as he makes his way back down the stairs with a hand tracing the brick walls on his way down.

With a new flurry of confusion, Dream rounds on George's door, knocking harder than he had the other two times he'd requested to speak with George again.

"George," he calls out in a harsh tone. "Were you going to tell me you invited me as a guest to your birthday party, or was it going to be a *surprise*?"

Suddenly, the door is opening in front of him. George is standing in the doorway, looking more put together than he had when he first opened the door this morning.

"You said we were *friends*," he bites out bitterly.

Dream doesn't like the expression on his face. He doesn't like the way his eyebrows are drawn down angrily or how his bottom lip is sucked in just the slightest between his teeth. He doesn't like the way George's voice suddenly sounds like venom in his ears.

"Guess you're taking that statement back, right?"

"*What?* What the hell makes you ask that?" His doesn't like how his own voice echoes in his ears, doesn't like how forcefully he sounds. He knows George interprets it the same way when he watches him flinch back just the slightest.

"You showed up late, refused to tell me what happened even when I said I was asking because we were *friends*, and then promptly told me you were never taking me out again as if yesterday wasn't a good time! Doesn't sound like something a friend would say, honestly."

Dream blinks once and then a second time.

"So this *is* about me taking you out of the castle, isn't it?" He feels anger suddenly boil in his blood. Maybe Sapnap was right about everything. George was just using him to get out of the castle, wasn't it?

George had everything he wanted as his fingertips, though. What was there outside of this castle that could make him any happier?

Suddenly, he was looking in a mirror.

George looks like he's been caught in a pair of headlights, frozen at the accusation. He looks the same way Dream remembered feeling when *he* had pointed out the fact that he was never happy where he used to live.

George was a lot more alike to Dream than he originally thought, wasn't he?

"I— I don't know what you're talking about," George stumbles over his words.

Everything suddenly clicks in his mind like a puzzle. He should have seen it upon their first interaction when he'd requested to meet with him personally in private; having him refer to him informally, as if they were equals. He mentioned having seen Dream before, beyond the walls— saying that Dream was something else. He *knew* Dream would know what it was like beyond the walls.

That's why he'd asked him if he'd been beyond the kingdom gates and if it was truly as nice out there as people had said it was.

He thinks back to the way George showed up to the guard's quarters, beckoning him to have a warm breakfast with him. He thinks back on every moment George had invited him into his room, handing him a book insisting he'd like it. Thinks back George pulling him around the castle, insisting he must explore the library with him because he'd love it.

He thinks back to the day before he brought George out of the castle.

He was trying to butter him up all along, wasn't he? He was trying to convince Dream that they were friends— that they were *equal*.

He thinks back to the gift he'd given him, an expensive one, at that.

Sapnap was right all along.

George was not the person he was trying to seem he was.

"You don't have to lie to me," he suddenly speaks, forgetting his place. It didn't matter anymore, did it? He wasn't just George's guard anymore.

He was the guard George was trying to use to get out of here.

It all added up, it really did. He was the only person that stood out to George amongst the crowd of guards that he *knew* went outside of the kingdom walls. George was colorblind, he wouldn't be able to recognize the guards at a distance— but it wasn't hard to miss the *mask*.

The same mask he'd brought up on their first encounter.

"I know how easy it is to use people," he tacts on in an airy breath, taking another step closer to the prince with confidence, "I've done it thousands of times to get where I am now."

He thinks back to the place he used to live and all the people he hurt to make it to this damned kingdom in the first place, cringing so deeply at the memories. He wasn't any better than George was at this moment, was he?

"You just want to get out of here— out of this castle, and you thought I'd be the perfect person to escort you out, didn't you?" He's not sure why he's getting so angry, he didn't have a right to be after all.

This was just karma playing out.

George's facial expression changes, the weak and timid expression he once held changing into something fiery and dangerous.

"It's really bold to make an assumption like that—"

"Tell me why you chose me as your guard," he butts in, "and *don't* tell me it was out of curiosity."

George's composure all but breaks in front of him as he takes yet another step back, retreating into the safety of his room.

"*What?*" He hisses out. "Want me to sing you a congratulations for finally figuring it out?" His words are bitter, hitting Dream like a slap in the face.

But he doesn't care.

He should have expected it.

"God damnit, Dream," George's voice cracks as a hand cards through his hair. "I wasn't trying to hurt you or anything, I really wasn't."

Fire is all Dream can see.

"What are you even running from? You have it *made* for you, George!" His words are harsh, pelting George like a gun. "You have a whole ass *party* being held for you, and you still want to leave?"

"*Yes,*" George hisses out, pulling his hand from his tangled hair. "God, Dream, I never asked to be a prince! Who *wants* the weight of a kingdom on their shoulders?" He's yelling, but his words aren't getting through to Dream. "I'm not built for this type of world, the politics, the fancy life, sitting in a castle all day until I decompose! I want to be out there," he dramatically points out to his open balcony doors, "I want to be *alive!* I'm so sick of just living, training to be some mindless zombie for the rest of my life. Every year brings me closer to inheriting the throne, and I don't *want it!*"

There are tears slipping down the prince's cheeks now, but Dream can't bring himself to care.

"I want to be out there, with the people! I want to travel and see every damn little thing this awful world has to offer before I die! I'm so sick of looking at this world through books. I just want the taste of freedom!"

Dream takes one last look at the prince before he's promptly walking out of the room.

"You're so selfish."

His father is looking down on him with a disappointing gaze; a look he's been on the receiving end of one too many damn times. The flower stem that had once been tucked between his thumb and index finger falls to his feet, petals breaking at the impact.

"You're never leaving this room again, ever." His voice is unwavering, and it scares him.

"Dad, I was just—"

He flinches back when his father steps closer to him. He can't help but notice the fists he's

sporting.

"There's no buts about this situation, Clay! You can't even follow simple orders!"

He stares up at his father, trying to stay strong, trying not to crumble before him. He's ignoring the way his knees are crying to buckle, ignores the fingernails pricking into his palms.

"I— I couldn't just—"

A hand is raised to his face and he has half a mind to take another step back when harsh fingertips slip across his cheek. It's not the first time he's been hit, and from the looks of it, it won't be the last.

"Shut up, you imbecile," his father scolds. "You can't do anything right, can you? We've given you so many chances, Clay, and yet every time we still find you ignoring clear orders, doing the complete opposite!"

His father is looming over him again, and this time there's no escaping the hand sweeping his way. He's already backed up against his bedroom wall when his father slaps him hard enough for his head to snap the opposite way.

"I am not raising an incompetent son, do you understand me?" He isn't given the chance to reply when his father's hand comes across his other cheek.

He stands there for a second, collecting himself as he cowers in front of his father. That just happened, didn't it?

Out of the corner of his eyes, he sees him. He's cringed up on himself, standing as stiff as a board with his eyes watching him tentatively. He felt sorry for the poor guard who had to witness these beatings so frequently.

His eyes flicker back to his father, who is still fuming with anger. "This kingdom will go to ruins one day in your name."

He wasn't expecting the sudden onslaught of a fist colliding with his jaw. He wasn't expecting his knees to finally give out, sending him straight to the wooden floor. He lays there, stunned as he watches his father's feet shuffle his way.

"Please," he mutters through chapped and broken lips when he realizes his father is raising his foot in front of his face. He raises his arms in front of his face in just enough time to block the kick that was aimed for his nose. The rubber burns against his arms, but all he does is hiss out in pain.

He sees him, out of the corner of his eye, turn abruptly away from the scene. It's for the best, he tells himself, as his father's foot comes down on his fragile arms once again. He'd rather take the beating than watch his poor guard take it for him.

George is following him down the stairs frantically. He wants to tell him to stop, to just turn around and sit in his room, but he feels like he has no authority to do so.

"Dream, wait, please!" George calls from behind him as he reaches the bottom step. He doesn't know where exactly he's going. He can't go far, after all. His duty was tied to this tower; to the prince who stood behind him in withering breaths.

"Please, I really never meant to hurt you," he spills out, "I feel like we really could be friends.

You're an amazing person, Dream, but you just don't understand what it feels like to be trapped."

He finds himself turning around so fast that the breath is practically knocked out of his lungs. George is standing on the last step of the staircase, just a few hairs away from his face. He blinked owlishly at him, his red and blotchy face slightly sobering up.

"I should have known your motives from the start," he chuckles, "looking at you is like looking in a mirror."

George's face screwed up sourly. "Is that supposed to be some type of insult?"

"It means we're way more alike than you think we are," he whispers under his breath, pushing closer to the prince. George retreats back up a step, looking more flustered than confused.

"I don't get what that's supposed to mean," he confesses.

"Good," he spits back, turning around. "You're not supposed to get it."

He walks promptly out of the prince's tower, and thankfully, he's not followed.

Sweat drips profusely from his forehead, drenching his short hair. He's too caught up in the fluid and familiar motions of swinging the blade clutched in his hands to think about how disgusting he felt.

He's angry; the type of angry that drove him down to the guard's practicing range, where he'd pelt the dummies until they tore open with the dullest blade he owned.

He doesn't know what exactly drove him down here tonight, but he guesses it has something to do with his parents and the new lock on his bedroom door. It didn't stop him from getting out here, obviously, jumping from a three-story window wasn't as dangerous as his parents thought it was.

He's slashing into the side of the dummy, drenched in tears and sweat. He wants to yell—wants to scream to the entire world how mad he is, how much he despises every little bit of it—but he doesn't. He keeps himself quiet as he pounds his sword into the dummy's side like an ax, his fingers burning and blistered.

He's already halfway into tearing the dummy apart when he hears the familiar tread of footsteps behind him.

"Clay," their voice calls out quietly to him. He ignores it, throwing his sword into the dummy twice as hard.

"Clay. Please." He's preoccupied, but they don't seem to care. "Clay, please, it's midnight."

His sword drops to the grass limply as he turns around, only to be greeted with a hand in front of his face. His brain doesn't have enough time to recognize whose hand is coming to greet him before he's flinching back so violently that the other person jumps back too, their hand dropping to their side.

Flashes of his father run through his mind so violently he feels like he's experiencing whiplash.

Hands coming down to beat on him—fists against his arms and chests—feet and knees coming down on his stomach and arms like he was a punching bag—

"Jesus, Clay," they whispered in the night, their facial expression a mix between hurt and confused,

"I wasn't going to hurt you."

"I know," he mumbles numbly, "I know, I know—I'm sorry."

"You have nothing to be sorry about..."

Dream doesn't return back to the castle that day, after having predominantly walked out. After walking himself out of George's tower, he walked right out the castle on autopilot and found himself back in his bedroom at the guard's quarters.

Sapnap was still here, as it was his day off. He looked alarmed, to say the least, when he watched Dream trudge back into the room.

"Dream? Are you okay—"

"You were right," he confesses, tensing at how 'cut to the chase' they sounded. Suddenly, he's sitting on the edge of Sapnap's cot, his masked face cradled in his hands. "God, you were right about everything."

Sapnap doesn't reply for a second, but when he feels a hand graze the opening in his armor around his elbow he instantly settles into the touch.

God, he was so touch starved.

"Want to be more specific?"

"About the prince," he spills, pulling his head from his hands. Sapnap looks to him with wide eyes. "He's just as selfish as you said he was."

Sapnap doesn't push any further, and instead, envelops him in the most half-assed hug he can manage with Dream's armor.

"I'm so sorry, Dream," he mumbles into his friend's ear sincerely. "I'm so sorry about everything. I didn't mean to hurt you. I didn't want to see you hurt."

He leans into his friend's arms, resting his bruise chin on his shoulder. *"I know,"* he gets through a ragged breath. *"I know."*

Maybe he wouldn't be so mad about George if he had a valid reason for wanting to leave the castle. His parents seemed lovely—*God,* they'd probably allow him beyond the gates if he just *asked.*

Dream probably shouldn't be talking. He was selfish in his own ways, admittedly; but at least he wasn't selfish enough to leave a kingdom simply because he didn't feel like he was suited to be a prince.

The following morning, Dream returns to the castle an hour earlier than he was expected to arrive. He's expecting to be bombarded the moment he walks in by an advisor to be scolded for his absence yesterday, but he isn't. What he pulled yesterday was stupid, he knew that. He could get into a lot of trouble for leaving the prince by himself. God, he was putting George at risk by leaving him alone. He doubted he had any sense of self-defense. This kingdom didn't engage in any wars, there would be no reason to teach the prince protective skills.

Despite his anger with the prince, he vowed the second he started up the tower stairs he wouldn't

pull something like that again. His feelings weren't worth more than someone's life.

When he arrives and knocks at George's door, he gets no response. His first thought is maybe he's still asleep, but that wouldn't make any sense. From what he knew so far, George was a morning person. He was always awake before the sun rose.

Without a word, he pushed the unlocked door open, only to be greeted with a still and quiet room. "George?" His voice sounds strained, but he was too busy focusing on the strain he felt on his limbs to care.

There was no sign of George anywhere in the room.

He's on autopilot as he makes his way to George's bed, pulling the sheets up to reveal the underneath of the bed. It was empty; barren. No discarded cloak.

He throws the sheet back down with wide eyes. There was no way the prince *left*.

He turns around abruptly, scanning the rest of the room with his heartbeat pounding in his ears.

There, sitting on his desk, is a single piece of paper.

"Don't come looking for me. I'll be back later.

- Prince George"

He stares down at the clearly quickly scrawled words before he slams the note back down on the desk hard enough to make his still healing hand burn. The ink smudges when he pulls his hand away.

Fresh ink.

He couldn't have gone far.

"God damnit," he whispered under his breath as he made his way out of the bedroom and back down the staircase. He had to find George, and quick for that matter. Where the hell would he have gone? And *why* would he even come back if he managed to go far? He clearly didn't want to stick around, so if he had the chance, wouldn't he just leave fully?

He tries to not make it apparent how frantic he feels as he makes his way down the hallways at a fast pace. The servants around him don't pay him much mind, thankfully, too busy with their mundane tasks of keeping the castle tidy.

He doesn't know where he's going. He doesn't even know where *George* is going. There were only a handful of places in the castle that Dream really remembered, and they were just simple places George had dragged him to before. He'd been in a lot of the meeting rooms, mainly because that is where George met with servants and those who were making preparations for his party. He'd also been to the indoor garden area, the kitchen and library, but that was about it.

George didn't seem too interested in any other rooms in the castle. If he said he'd be back, he most likely wasn't planning on going far.

It wouldn't be hard to spot him around the castle if he was wearing *his* cloak.

The first room he finds his feet taking him to is the kitchen. Two thoughts ran through his mind. One, if Skeppy was there, he could ask him to help him discreetly find the prince. Two, one of the cooks was clearly a friend of George's, if he'd stopped by the kitchen today he may have told him where he was going.

He sped up his pace, his hot breath pushing up against his mask uncomfortably.

He made it to the kitchen rather quickly, thankfully. The second he stepped into the doorway, he was surprised by how many people were already in there moving boxes and chatting. His eyes scanned through the crowd before they settled on the one guard in the corner of the room who had been in the middle of lifting a large crate.

He walks in without announcing himself, catching a few glares thrown his way, but it doesn't bother him.

"Skeppy," he addresses loudly. The guard turns, startled as he drops the crate onto the table he'd been moving it to.

"Dream?" He replied steadily. "What's wrong?"

A breath of relief practically left him as he took a step closer to Skeppy, whispering close to his ear, "the prince *left*, and I don't know where to start looking for him. I need to find him soon or I am in deep trouble."

Skeppy doesn't visibly react, thankfully. He just nods, turning over his shoulder to catch someone's attention behind them.

"Bad, come here."

Bad. He recognized that nickname. That's George's friend.

From behind the table Skeppy had just been at, a shorter man emerged. Dream didn't recognize ever seeing him before, but he was sure he recognized the voice as soon as he heard it.

"Skeppy? What's wrong?" Bad's eyes shift to where he's standing and he tenses. "Dream?"

He's surprised Bad recognizes him, since he is pretty sure they have never seen one another face to face, but at the same time he shouldn't be. Everyone kind of *knew* of Dream, the only guard who wore a mask—a mask that looked like a child had drawn a smiley face on it, for god sake.

"Have you seen George?" He asks under his breath.

Bad's eyes widen as he looks away from Dream. "I saw him for breakfast, but that was about it." Something in the way Bad is standing, looking away from Dream, his body turned from him, gives Dream the idea that he knows something he shouldn't be telling him.

"He's gone," he informs the cook easily, "left a note telling me to not go after him, but we have to meet with the advisors in an hour. Where should I go and look for him?" He keeps his cool well, thankfully. His tone remains even with just enough anger to it to intimidate someone.

Clearly, it works, because Bad glances at him from the side of his eyes before looking back to Skeppy. "If anyone asks, I didn't tell you this, but there's a room on the second floor of the library. You'd miss it if you weren't paying attention, but it's behind one of the book shelves towards the east wall. I'm pretty sure he hangs around there."

Skeppy's eyes are back on him. "Want me to come with you?"

He nods, and before he knows it Skeppy is trailing behind him through the castle.

"What happened with you two? I thought you were cool, or whatever."

Dream has the half sense of mind to scoff. "I thought Sapnap would have already told you already," sneered Dream, "You guys were right, big whoop."

"Right about what?"

"George," he replies coolly, as if it was obvious, "he was just using me to get out of the castle and got mad I won't sneak him out again."

Skeppy doesn't comment, and he's thankful.

Dream follows Bad's directions, making his way to the second floor of the royal library and walking toward the east wall. Sure enough, there was a small crack between the bookshelf that led to a small halfway.

"I'll wait here," Skeppy announces from behind him as he slips through the bookshelves. He kind of wishes Skeppy would follow him as some sort of backup, but he knows he doesn't need it.

When Dream meets the end of the small and cramped hallway, he's brought into a small dirty room. He's taken back by the sheer amount of books carelessly thrown about the room, papers filled with scribbles all around him.

There, sitting in a small alcove of the room, is George. He's wearing his cloak, sitting idly with a notepad leaned against his knee.

"George."

The prince's head snaps up quickly, a pen dropping from his hand. "How did you know I was here?"

"It doesn't matter, you *idiot*." He rushes toward the prince, hastily grabbing at his arms and pulling him from the alcove. He puts up a little bit of a fight, pulling away from Dream's touch like he'd burned him.

George pauses suddenly, his mouth hanging open as he took a once over of Dream's outfit. Honestly, he'd forgotten he wasn't wearing his armor for once and instead was wearing a tight-fitting pair of tan slacks with a loose-fitting white shirt.

"The outfit," George pointed out, "what's with the outfit."

Dream stares down at the prince for a moment, processing his words. There were much more important things to be discussing right now than his outfit.

"We're *both* supposed to be fitted today for outfits," he replied as if it were common knowledge. "We're supposed to meet with the tailors and advisors soon and I didn't have the time to wait around for you. Can we get going, please? I would rather not lose my job because you wanted to hang around in a *hobbit room*."

Screwing his mouth shut, George lifted his head confidently, eyeing Dream.

"You didn't seem to care about losing your job yesterday when you walked out," he says

confidently.

"That was different. *You* made me leave." His tone is growing snappy and he knows he should put himself in check, but he doesn't. "I'm pretty sure you wouldn't want to hang around a prince who just wanted to use you for his own benefits."

"I told you, I wasn't trying to hurt you. I really wasn't," George insisted.

Taking one last look at his expressional face, Dream turns abruptly, eyeing one of the shelves in the corner of the room. "I thought you wanted to actually be friends, you know," he whispers just loud enough for the prince to hear. "It's been a while since anyone has really treated me nicely, that wasn't the guards, and it felt *nice*. I think I have the right to feel upset, don't you?"

George doesn't reply as he stands, floundering like a fish trying to find the right words to say.

"I think the worst thing was I stuck up for you—I *vouched* for your character to the other guards, saying that you were a genuinely kind person even when they said that you were probably just like every other egotistical royal. I really thought you were different." He turns back to George, finding two wide eyes staring up at him. "I hate being proven wrong, George."

The prince looks to the floor, avoiding his gaze.

"That's what I thought," he scoffs, "you really don't have anything to say, do you?" He feels his confidence drastically slipping as he watches George's face morph into something soft and vulnerable.

"I don't plan on walking out again like that. As big of a fool as you made me out to be, your life is more valuable than some petty feelings I hold."

They don't exchange another pair of words as Dream ushers George out of the room angrily. Skeppy watches them with interest as they walk back into the main part of the library.

"Found your prince I see," he easily jokes, trying to break the tension between the three of them.

"Yeah, what a *catch*."

He wishes that was the last time he had to go and find his prince, but it isn't. George makes his job a living *hell* for the rest of that week.

When Things Shift

Chapter Summary

Something is pushing him toward George, like they're supposed to naturally gravitate to one another. He hates it, he hates it so much, and yet here he was beating around the bush scared to face the reality of what he was feeling.

If he really wanted to hate George, he would have sicked the whole guard force on him by now and framed him for possible treason; but he didn't.

Maybe Dream was just a weak man.

Thursday, Dream stares absentmindedly at himself in the large mirror of the room he doesn't own. He's disregarded his mask, watching the way his jaw clenched as he inspects his still bruised face which was a still pretty color of purple and blue. He doesn't know where George ran off to first that day as he was simply left with yet again another note that told him to not look for him, and that he was still in the castle somewhere. He gave it half an hour before he started searching for him, only to find him hidden away in another alcove in one of the deserted hallways of the castle.

"Leave me alone, Dream," he'd said.

"Why're you being so difficult? You know it's kind of my job to watch over and protect you, right?" Dream had replied with an attitude.

"I can hold my own, you know."

"I'd like to see you try."

That day, he'd sat with his back against the wall of a random hallway uncomfortably as George moaned and groaned about how ugly the castle architecture was. *"Why does this castle have so many damn alcoves and crawl spaces? They look, and feel, out of place here."*

"I don't know, but you seem to like them seeing as you choose to hang around in them."

"They're ugly spots, but they're comfortable. Try and sit in one."

"You understand I'm fairly taller than you, right?"

Friday, he'd just arrived at the castle in time to catch George slipping out of the kitchen with a tray of cookies. He gave him a good chase, insisting that 'cookie time' was a 'sacred moment' and he couldn't have some dingy guard ruining the fun for him. Dream hated to say it, but he found it almost *endearing*. It brought him comforting memories from his childhood when he and his friend would chase one another around the enormous kitchen in the middle of the night laughing as they attempted to make a batch of cookies, which always ended up tasting more like sand-paper.

That day, he stood idly outside of George's bedroom door in silence. They didn't talk much after the whole "chasing him down and dragging him back into his room by his arm" fiasco.

He didn't want to admit it, but he missed George's calm conversations that day.

Saturday hit him like a truck. He wasn't surprised when George wasn't up in his bedroom when he had arrived, but he was surprised by the fact he didn't leave a note like he'd done before. So again, he took off in a frantic search around the castle for the prince, only to come up with nothing in the span of two hours. Panic had started to settle in his system. He *really* didn't like the thought of leaving George by himself for long, and he *hated* the fact that he'd practically paced around the entirety of the castle only to return to the entrance of George's tower empty-handed.

With absolutely no more ideas up his sleeve, he finally marched his way to the outdoor garden, which practically encased the entire outside of the castle with bushels of floral.

He dumbly thought that he should have checked here in the first place when he caught George sitting in a patch of pumpkins, wrapped in the cloak he'd given to him just days ago.

"Finally found me?"

"Kind of a weird spot, don't you think?"

"Thought it'd be fun."

"Fun?" Dream had parroted back as he sat himself beside George in the patch.

"Yeah," the prince replied with a chuckle, *"fun. It's a nice feeling, being wanted."*

Dream paused, stiffening at the words as he carefully examined George's face. He looked deep in thought, his eyebrows pinched just the slightest, his bottom lip jutted out. This wasn't just another off-handed comment for fun, right?

"I know it's your job to look after me, but it's kind of funny watching you chase after me like you want me around." George finally looked his way, their eyes locking. Dream could see George's eyes glistening through the October sunlight with tears. *"I mean it, seriously by the way. No more lying."*

Sunday came marching in like a lion, marking it exactly one week until Prince George's birthday celebration.

Today, he's lucky enough to pass the kitchen as Bad is slipping out with a handful of trays. They exchange a quick glance before Bad lets out a small and airy laugh. "Pretty sure he's going out beyond the garden. There's a densely settled forest right on beyond the garden."

Luckily with his speed and good eyesight, it doesn't take him long to target the green fabric that was moving through the garden. By the time he has caught up with the young prince, he's knee deep in the tall thick grass of the woods that surrounds their castle's garden.

He can hear his blood rushing in his ears as a rasped breath escapes him. "You just love being difficult, don't you," he barely gets out as he stops at his prince's side, bending at the waist. It wasn't even a question at this point; it was a statement. Prince George had done nothing more than cause him trouble since he'd been assigned as his personal guard.

At this point, Prince George's actions didn't surprise him. Of course he'd go out and run away from the castle for fun just in spite of him.

"Didn't I tell you not to follow me?" George mutters at his side. He sounds lost and confused.

"Didn't even make it to your room today," he explains before he clears his throat. *"If I could just leave you alone, I would; trust me,"* Dream finds himself responding, head dipped down to avoid

George's eyes. "I think you've made it painfully clear that you really don't want me around anymore. If it's such a hassle, having me as a guard, I can ask to be reassigned."

He doesn't know why he says it, but it's too late to take back the bitter words. He knows there's moments when he can see George slowly opening up, the *real* George, but it doesn't quell any of the doubts he has. George wasn't even looking for friendship from him anymore, was he? He probably just saw him as another annoying guard.

Soon enough, he'd just be simply kept at arms length like Quackity was, wasn't he?

Maybe George would want to look for another guard, a guard who'd be more susceptible to his desires for leaving the kingdom. A lot of guards hated it here, if he were to ask one of the lower ranking guards to be his personal guard, he was sure the two of them would be gone for good in a day.

There's a lull in their conversation. A long pause that has Dream snapping his head up in such a fast motion that it leaves him breathless when he catches two owlish eyes blinking back at him. The other's gaze is gone in just seconds as George turns back to staring into the depths of the forest ahead of them.

"You're the worst guard I've ever had," George comments under his breath so lowly it has Dream second-guessing what he had said.

"Oh?" Dream sighs, straightening his posture. "What makes you say that?"

"You let me get away with too much." Again, George's eyes are on him; his gaze filled with such seriousness it has Dream's stomach dropping for just a moment.

"Any sane guard by now would have put me on lockdown, had the whole guard force on me. Even after everything I put you through, with the whole you know, tricking you situation, we're here, standing alone in the middle of a forest." At this point, Dream's a little unsure of where George is going with this. "You must like me or something."

The venom that he'd remembered the prince's voice holding just days ago is gone, disappeared and replaced with something so soft that Dream's wondering if he's just fucking with him again.

"Can't tell if you're being serious or not," he mumbled under his breath, feeling heat raise to his cheeks.

"I'm being serious," George insists, "I told you already, no more lying."

Dream takes in the prince's open stance, trying to read into every single bit of his body language. He doesn't look defensive or scared, doesn't look uncomfortable or distant. He's just standing there, right in front of Dream, with a soft expression.

"I want to start over, you and I," George begins, looking down to his feet. "I don't want this to sound like I'm trying to manipulate you again, I *really* don't, and I want to make that as painfully obvious as I can." George finally turns back to him, gulping down a breath.

"Please, take me out of the castle— just one more time, please let me have that feeling again. I'll never ask again," his words are jumbled, very unlike the way he'd first persuaded him to take him out. "I know it's stupid of me to ask you, after everything I've done. But I swear my curiosity gets the best of me. I just want to know what's beyond those walls. I don't want to permanently leave, as much as the idea is tempting."

Dream stares down at the prince, annoyance pricking at his skin. He thinks back to Sapnap and Skeppy and all they have said about this situation. He thinks back to the obviously painful fact that George had used him before, and admitted to it. Was this just another manipulation tactic?

"I'll stop this. All of this. Just let me see what's out there, just one time, and I promise I'll start listening. I'll work better to be that person you thought I was, and I *really* mean it, Dream." George gasps down another breath, eyes wide and frantic. "God, I don't even know why I'm asking you to take me again. If I really wanted to I could just *leave*, but I need someone to ground me and keep me from genuinely leaving forever."

Dream continues to stare down the prince through his mask. He doesn't think he can trust a single word that comes from his mouth.

"I don't trust you," he voices, crossing his arms over his chest protectively. "Besides, I doubt you could even hold your own. If something were to happen and I failed to protect you, and you had absolutely no other way of keeping yourself safe, it would be all my fault."

He doesn't know why he sugar coats his no, but he does.

He hates the way George makes him feel. There's the smallest weak spot he holds for the prince, and he knows he can't let it get the better of him. They're just so alike, it's painful for Dream. He knows what it feels like to just want out—he knows what it feels like to want to see the world—he knows that adventure and curiosity feel like drugs when they're being fulfilled.

He understands every single aspect of what George feels, despite the utter *selfishness* that came with his curiosity. He can't blame it on him though, can he? He was just a sheltered prince who was a curious human.

He was human.

Dangerously human.

"If I can find a way for you to trust me, and prove to you that I actually *can* hold my own, would you actually take me out beyond the walls?"

Something in the moment pulls Dream to a full stop. Being alone with the prince, in the middle of the woods, with such an intense stare directed at him is making him feel a way he does *not* want to feel.

He wants to hate George.

He wants to see him as just a selfish royal who wanted to use him as a pawn.

He wants to see him as just another disposable part in his own life; *but he can't*.

"I don't know," he snickers, "depends on how convincing your argument is."

Something is pushing him toward George, like they're supposed to naturally gravitate to one another. He hates it, he hates it so much, and yet here he was beating around the bush scared to face the reality of what he was feeling.

If he really wanted to hate George, he would have sicked the whole guard force on him by now and framed him for possible treason; but he *didn't*.

Maybe Dream was just a weak man.

The same weak man who was trying to run from his past, but ultimately watching it reflect back onto him in the form of a *person*.

Somehow, that night long after he's escorted George back to his room after dinner, he finds himself leaning on the young prince's balcony. The cold fall air nips at his neck and cheeks, but he can't seem to be bothered to find shelter back in the prince's room.

He should have brought himself back to the guards' quarters long ago, but he was too busy caught up in his own thoughts. If he were to bring these thoughts around Skeppy or Sapnap, he knew everything that had happened over the past two weeks would just repeat.

He still couldn't figure out *why* he was so drawn to George. He genuinely wanted to believe that George was looking for friendship from him, but for his own safety, he really needed to keep the prince at arm's length. He couldn't risk losing this job. He couldn't risk going on the run again, looking for a new life to start.

Not when *she* was still out there somewhere, looking for him.

Part of him thinks that if he lived his life under different circumstances and George had asked him to run away with him, he'd say yes in a heartbeat. He hates the thought, and truly it leaves a sour pit in his stomach, but it's the truth. Despite his past and all of the choices he had to make to get to where he is today, there was still a part of him that never vanished from childhood. The part of him that sought the adrenaline rush from actually *living*—the part of him that would travel the world on foot just to keep himself from staying in one spot for long.

God, if *she* wasn't looking for him still, he probably wouldn't have settled in the kingdom of Gantrick. He would never have become a guard. He'd still be traveling freely, no strings attached to anything, seeking out everything the world had to offer.

Maybe that's why he couldn't hate George for being selfish. They were just too damn alike, just looking for the same exact things in life. He couldn't blame him for being that way.

If Dream never had to worry about keeping a good reputation—never had to worry about being a "good guard"—never had to worry about starting somewhere new where he could possibly be found—he would have *never* cared that George was trying to manipulate him to get him out of the kingdom.

That was the cold hard, scary truth.

His train of thought, which was probably traveling at the speed of a bullet train by now, was interrupted when George finally stepped out onto the balcony beside him. "Are you just going to stand there and freeze your ass off?"

"I'm not cold."

A little white lie never hurt.

"I don't know about that one, I can see your armor trembling."

Before he can reply, he feels warmth wrap around him comfortably. Looking down, he watches as George soothes the dark blue blanket around his shoulders, his fingers trailing the side of his shoulder pieces before ultimately dropping onto the balcony railing.

"Why are you still here, Dream?" He doesn't question him rudely, his tone rather filled with concern. He deflates at the question, leaning his body weight against the balcony. He doesn't

know, really. He doesn't have any reason to still be here, and yet, here he was.

"Got a lot on my mind, I guess," he replies, eyes flickering to the mountains that curved just above the kingdom gates. "Am I intruding?"

"No," George is quick to reply, "I like your company, a lot." He pauses, shifting closer to Dream. "I missed your company this week, actually."

Dream can't help the airy laugh that escapes him. He subtly nudges George's side, rolling his eyes under his mask. "God George, just tell me you love me already." The joke leaves him so naturally that he pauses, the reality of *who* he's talking to sinking in.

George scoffs. "You're so weird, you know that?"

"I've been informed, a couple of times, actually." He's grateful George didn't seem put off by the joke.

"Seriously though, what's up? You don't have to tell me if you don't want to, just letting you know I'm willing to lend an ear."

He shifts slightly, just enough so he can see George out of the corner of his mask. He's standing beside him, his elbows propped up on the balcony as his attention lies somewhere towards the gate. The moonlight shines off the tip of his nose and his jawline, making the scene before him look almost ethereal.

He hates how he notices how damn attractive George can be.

"I guess I'm just thinking about life, if that makes sense?" It's not far from the truth, at least. George kind of was his life now.

George hums, nodding. "Did you want to continue thinking about life? Or do you want a distraction?"

"A distraction sounds kind of nice," he can't help but say.

Again, humming, George holds up a finger and returns back into his room. A moment later, he returns with a candle in hand and a book he doesn't quite recognize. It's a small book, a lot different compared to the books he's read before from George's library.

"I never lied about my love for reading, by the way. Want me to read you a story?"

He's taken back by the offer. God, when was the last time someone even read him a damn story? He was twenty-one, so probably twelve years ago at most.

"You want to read me a story?" He can't help but laugh.

"What, you don't like being read to?" George sets the candle on the balcony's railing, an eyebrow raised. "Don't tell me you're one of *those* people, now."

"One of those people?" Dream parrots back, fascinated by the way the candle's light bounces off of George's face.

"You know, one of those people who doesn't like being read to. Everyone likes it."

"Can't say I even remember the last time someone read to me," he interjected, "I was probably a child then."

"You still act like a child now, so it works out." Dream couldn't help but watch as George raised both of his eyebrows, a wide smile spreading across his face.

"I'm taking that as a compliment, just so you know."

He's not sure why he doesn't say no.

Strangely, he spends that night curled up on the ground of Prince George's balcony, watching the candle he's brought to the floor flicker through the wind as George read aloud a book about a bug that he didn't even remember the name of.

He hates how soothing George's voice becomes.

He doesn't recognize where he is. Truthfully, he'd slipped into the village the previous night with a simple candle, finding shelter in the barn of someone's home. He had been delirious, having been sleep deprived for several days. He was pretty sure he was also dehydrated and fighting off heatstroke, but those weren't particularly on the top of his priority list to take care of.

The first priority he had was to find somewhere to settle until he could make a more sound-proof plan, the second was to get rid of her. It'd been three weeks since he'd left the kingdom of Gwent, and she was still on his trail.

Originally, he'd thought she was nothing more than a mere guard. She never really stood out to him before, seeing as she blended in with the crowd pretty well. Of course, she had to have been one of the kingdom's best-trained assassins; and she was after his head now.

He thought maybe he'd be wanted back alive, but that wasn't the case anymore, was it? He was a traitor to the kingdom of Gwent, and a murderer, at that. If he were to ever be caught, he'd be hung for his crimes.

It was far too late to turn back now.

When he'd rolled himself out of the hay bale he'd fallen asleep in, sticky and sweaty, he realized two things. One, he'd overslept, and two, he didn't just wake up because his body was ready. There were footsteps coming from somewhere behind him.

Pulling himself up onto his knees, he reached for his belongings, his right hand grasping around his crossbow while his left floundered around the handle of his sword.

"Hello?" He'd called out, turning his head swiftly in the dark barn. "Who's there?"

A feminine giggle was his response as the clicking of their footsteps came closer. "You're not looking so good, Clay," the voice called out, "I bet you want to go back home, don't you? Back where it's cool, back where you have thousands of servants caring for your every whim. Kind of sucks you're just a fucking selfish brat, doesn't it?"

He dropped his crossbow, focusing his attention to his sword. "Minx," he'd called out, his eyes searching frantically in the dark barn. "Come out."

"And what, fight you?" Sneered Minx. "God, look at you. I could probably sit on you and your lungs would give out. Just admit it, your soft little ass wasn't prepared for this."

Clay got to his feet, bettering his grip onto the handle of his sword. He knew Minx was right, he was in no state to fight. His legs were wobbling, his fingers barely having enough strength to keep

his sword up. He didn't care though, he'd rather go out giving a fight than to just die.

"You have no idea what it was like living in that position." His voice is shaky as he turns himself around, scanning the entirety of the barn around him. "I did what was best for everyone. If I had stayed, you wouldn't even be able to comprehend the amount of destruction that would have followed," he paused, stumbling over his words as he swallowed down his pride, "it wasn't all happiness and sunshine being their kid. You and I aren't much different— we're just two pawns they're using for their own game."

Silence.

There's no footsteps, no reply, no nothing. He stands there in agonizing anxiety for what seems like hours, waiting, waiting for something to happen.

When something does happen, he wasn't expecting a body to leap at him, taking the both of them to the ground in a heap. A horrid wheeze escapes him, causing his already scratchy throat to burn. He struggles against their grip, watching through what little light seeped through the cracks in the barn as his sword was thrown against the floor haphazardly.

"We're not alike at all," Minx hisses from above him, her knees pushing against his ribs bruisefully, "you're just a bitch that couldn't handle the heat when it came down to it. You're a damn coward for what you did to Fundy. For leaving. You were that kingdom's last hope, and this is how you repay them?"

Hands pressed against his jugular, fingernails scraping against the sides of his neck.

"For once, I don't feel bad for having to kill someone."

What a way to go out, he thought, as Minx pressed her palms to his throat and pushed hard enough for his vision to sway with white. He weakly pushed against her arms, trying his hardest in his compromised state to save himself, but he couldn't. The harder he fought against her, the harder she pushed.

Blood was rushing to his face. He could hear his fast-beating heart in his ears. His throat kept burning, the pain from it circling through his body.

He vaguely thought through his attempts to gasp at whatever air he could, that dying right now would be easier than fighting anymore. He wouldn't have to worry anymore about the kingdom he'd abandoned and all of its people. He wouldn't have to worry about the wrath his parents had planned out for him. He wouldn't have to keep running from Minx anymore.

He wouldn't have to feel guilty for murdering the only person who gave a single shit about him and his happiness.

Maybe that was the thought that willed him to stop fighting against her. Maybe he thought that he could die in peace finally, that he could escape the overwhelming guilt that was looming over him like a dark cloud. Maybe he thought life would just be better on the other side.

It's sad, really, how quick he was ready to accept death. Every second that Minx took choking him out, he thought about what little he had left to live for, and nothing came to mind. His vision was turning black quickly. He wanted to smile and thank Minx for putting him out of his misery, he really did.

He never got the chance to, thankfully.

Suddenly there was a loud sound he couldn't make out and a rush of air hit him like a truck. As if he'd been struck with lightning, he sat himself up, his hands flying to his throat as he choked through uneven breaths. His vision and hearing came back slowly, and he'd quickly realized that a pair of unfamiliar feet were standing in front of him and the barn door had been opened.

"Are you alright, child?" A man's voice called to him. He couldn't answer for a moment. He'd tried, obviously, but he failed when all but a croak left his throat. "Sylvée, fetch him some water."

But a moment later, a kind looking woman was bent in front of him, pressing a jug of water to his lips. "What's your name?" She'd asked, pulling the jug from his hands gently, scared he may drown in the water if he kept chugging it the way he was.

"Clayton," he replied, his voice horse. His eyes flickered from the woman, Sylvée, to the man who stood behind her, who had been wearing a green and white striped hat. Looking around them, he finally found Minx, who was out cold on the floor at the man's feet.

"Who are you?" The man questioned, unsheathing a sword. His eyes widened at the site of the diamond sword. The people had just saved him from dying, what was the point of lying?

"I'm a runaway, from the kingdom of Gwent," he'd replied, not taking his eyes away from the tip of the man's sword.

"Who is she?" He followed up, pointing the tip of his sword to Minx's head.

"Her name's Minx," he replied, watching as the man poked her head lightly, "she's a Gwent assassin, she's after my head."

"How long has she been chasing you, kid?"

"A month, at most," he answered. "I've been trying to get her off my tracks for a while."

The man sizes him up, his eyes practically boring into his soul. He sheaths his sword, stepping forward and motioning for Sylvée to stand. "Lucky for you, I hate government workers and the kingdom of Gwent," he chuckled dryly, "I don't even blame you for leaving that shit hole. Where are you trying to go?"

"I don't know. I left without that big of a plan," Clay replied truthfully.

The man nodded, crouching before him. "There's a kingdom far north from here, one of the only kingdoms that still has gates and walls surrounding it, okay? You won't be able to miss it. The kingdom of Gantrick will take you in as one of their own." The man is talking quickly, just above a whisper, but Clay is hanging onto every single last word he has to say. "I have a friend there that will vouch for you to stay, okay? He's a guard, his nick-name is Technoblade. If you get there, and you somehow find him, tell him Philza sent you."

Dream stands in the corner of one of the many meeting rooms, once again. A woman he doesn't recognize seeing before sits at George's side, flipping through a large book with him. They've been going over set up and designs for the party for hours now, and honestly, Dream was over it. He was grateful that in a week's time, he wouldn't have to sit through these long and boring meetings.

"So, color schemes..." The woman clicked her tongue, flipping through several pages before spreading them flat onto the table. "Here are a few to pick through. The first one may not be much your style, but the other four may?"

George pauses, squinting at the pages laid before him.

"If none of these are suitable though, we can figure something else out, your highness!"

George nods, looking up. He meets eyes with Dream for the first time in hours, clearing his throat. "Dream," he addressed, waving him over. "Can you look at these for me?"

Right. He's colorblind.

The woman beside him stills, sinking back into her chair with a confused look. Dream gives her a once over before he makes his way to George's side, his hands tucked behind the small of his back.

Before him lay five pages of ballrooms, each decorated in different colors. The first image is a mix between pink and white curtains, accented with bright yellow lights. The second and third are both mundane and simple, each set having dark red curtains with different colored chandelier lights. The fourth has a mix of deep royal blue curtains with golden accents, white hanging lights accompanying them. The last image doesn't really catch Dream's eyes, as it's just a very simple set up he's seen in any basic ballroom.

"The third image is a mix of blue and... uh?" George drifts off, pointing toward the third image.

"Gold accents. The hanging lights are a mix between gold and white, that's the best way I can put it," Dream replies, noticing the woman sitting beside George tense.

"I am so sorry your highness, I forgot you were colorblind!" She gasps, her hands coming up to cover her mouth.

George just laughs, shrugging it off. "It's no big deal, don't worry about it," he insists before picking up the third image, waving it toward Dream. "Would it seem like my style?" He turns in his seat, lifting his head to face Dream. Dream doesn't miss the way he lifts an eyebrow simply, a small smile curling on his face; and he is seriously starting to hate himself for noticing every small detail like that.

"I would think so," he answers, shrugging.

George quints up at him, his smile only growing wider. "Uh huh... I'm trusting you on this decision, Dream." The prince turns from him, handing the image to the woman with a smile. "This will be our pick, it looks like!"

She laughed, plucking the picture from his hands with care. "I think it's a very good pick, your highness. Looks like your guard has good taste."

"I would hope he does, he's my guard, after all."

Dream ignores the heat that rises to his cheeks as he returns back to his spot in the corner of the room.

That comment didn't need to mean anything if he didn't want it to.

For the second night in a row, Dream is sitting on George's balcony, watching as the last rays of sunlight disappear behind the mountains. It was another chilly night but he wasn't surprised, it was almost November after all. George followed him out onto the balcony not long after he'd settled down, already dressed in his clothes for the night. He brought out another blanket, settling on the ground beside Dream before wrapping the blanket around the both of them.

"Is this okay?" The prince asked, timidly.

Dream couldn't help the laugh that escaped him. "Yes, it's fine, you idiot." There's a fondness in his tone that he knows reaches George, but there's no way he could take it back now.

"Avoiding going back to the guards' quarters once again?"

Dream doesn't bother to shift his gaze from the mountains as he nods. "That obvious?"

"Kind of," George hummed. "How is Sapnap and Skeppy? Is everything okay with you guys?" He paused, shifting closer against his side. "Skeppy didn't seem too happy with you the other day."

Dream's almost a bit shocked that George even remembered their names, let alone picked up on his interaction with Skeppy the other day. "Things are okay, I guess," he replied shyly, hiking his shoulders up.

He had been avoiding Sapnap. It wasn't because he was mad at him or anything, that was definitely not it. He just knew he couldn't hide things well from Sapnap, and God, if he caught onto the fact that Dream was thinking about befriending George once again, he may as well just beat the hell out of him again.

"Trying to avoid another altercation with them. Sapnap hasn't been all that happy with my actions lately," he elaborates.

George seems to catch his drift. "Did Sapnap figure out? About you taking me out, that is."

Thoughtlessly, Dream raised his fingers to his chin, tracing the almost healed wound that had been there. "Yeah, let's just say he was pretty pissed with me."

They sit in silence for a moment longer, watching the last reminiscences of sunlight dissipate.

Dream fiddles with his fingers, pulling at the leather cladded gloves around his palms. Thinking back to Sapnap, he can't help but remember the night he'd basically attacked him, shouting that George was anything but good news. Maybe it wasn't George who was the issue, maybe it was just him. Just like George had pointed out the other day, he was the worst guard he'd ever had. He let him get away with so much—*too much*. Any good royal guard would have stopped George from crossing the boundaries of just simple acquaintances. Any good guard would have called the whole guard on him for sneaking out.

He couldn't help but think back onto his previous life—couldn't stop himself from thinking of *him*. The only person who made him feel human in a prison. *He* wasn't a bad person—*he'd* crossed so many damn lines that they didn't even exist anymore, and yet, he was still the best damn guard Dream had ever met.

"I don't think I'm all that good of a royal guard," he comments, turning his head just the slightest so he could make George's form out at his side. "They kind of threw me into this position without any training. I've crossed way too many lines, between us." He pauses motioning to where they were sitting now.

"I don't even think I'm supposed to be *here* right now, with you."

George's eyes are on him, steady and unnerving.

"I crossed too many lines too," he admits, shrugging. "I don't see a problem with it."

There's a nudge at his wrist. Looking down, Dream watched as George hesitantly wrapped his hand around his slightly exposed wrist, giving it a squeeze before he slipped his hand down, their palms meeting. More confidently, George took his gloved hand into his exposed hand, their fingers interlocking.

They fit perfectly together, he thought.

"I enjoy your company, Dream. I meant it when I said I don't care about formalities. I would much rather be friends with you than keep you at arm's length and treat you like a disposable part of my life." Heat rises to Dream's face for the second time that day. He doesn't dare to look up, his eyes trained on their interlocked hands.

"My last guard and I didn't have any sort of friendship, and I regret it," George suddenly admits, gripping his hand a little harder. "I tried being his friend, but he was a very *formal* person. Very strict with boundaries and what-not. It seemed like he could have cared less about me—which was fine, I never expected him to genuinely care? It was just his job, to look after me, after all."

The prince finally loosens his grip on his hand.

"He was the only other person I got to interact with around the castle that wasn't Bad or my parents. The servants have always been so timid around me and events don't happen a lot around here. I wish that Quackity and I had the opportunity to *actually* meet, without any sort of facade. I wish I got to know why he just *left* without saying anything."

George clears his throat, whispering an apology before he takes Dream's hand in both of his hands, which are surprisingly warm. Startled, Dream looks up, finally meeting eyes with George.

"Quackity's disappearance made me realize how temporary things are, how temporary this whole 'royal and regal' thing really is. Even before he left I already had my own doubts about becoming the king one day... But the whole situation solidified the fact that life was so short and could change in an instant. After he left I sat there for a while and just thought about where he could have gone—thought about all the stories I've read and how different the world was in each of them. After that I said *fuck it*, might as well leave too."

"When the royal advisor told me I had to pick a new guard, he gave me a list of names I never even recognized. I mulled over it for hours, sitting on the balcony. I'm pretty sure it was right after one of your stations was over because you were walking back towards the castle from the gates—and honestly, I did recognize you as the guard that had been beyond the gate before. I just made my decision from there, thinking you'd be the one that would change things," he pauses, finally taking a deep breath.

"I'm really sorry for using you the way I did, Dream. I'm also sorry for whatever the hell *that* tangent was too—but, I think the point still stands that I think you could change things for me."

Dream's mind is racing as George leans in closer to him, pressing his forehead against his armored shoulder.

"You're giving me hope that I actually can make friends within these walls."

They sit there for a moment longer in silence before Dream can pull himself together enough to actually form a coherent sentence.

"I think that's the most I've ever heard you say at once."

Whatever tension had previously been lingering in the air between them breaks as George laughed like he'd sprung a leak— timid at first before stopping and starting again.

"Thanks, Dream. You have such a way with words," George grumbles into his armor as he pinches his palm hard enough to make him flinch.

"Why thank you, *your highness*," he laughs out as he props his chin on top of George's head. "You know, I was thinking of becoming a poet before I joined the guards."

"Really?" George lifts his head just the slightest, his tone sounding serious.

"No, what the *fuck*."

The two erupted into a fit of laughter.

Maybe it was that moment that something finally shifted between them. Maybe it was that moment that something finally clicked in Dream's head.

Either way, Dream knew he was in big trouble.

"But seriously, George, I'm glad that I can give you a little bit of hope."

"Child," he is addressed by the guard at the front gate. Neither guard unsheathes their weapons to his surprise. If he'd seen someone approach in his state, he doubted he'd need to bring a sword to their throat. "What is your business here?"

Consciously, he pulls at the strap of his back, his arms shaking at the movement. It'd been about five weeks since he'd left Philza's barn and he'd yet to stop for a full night's rest. He was tired, hungry, and cold to the bone despite the scorching summer heat.

"I'm seeking shelter," he answers, his voice hoarse. He doubts his vocal cords would ever heal properly after what Minx had done to him.

"Where are you coming from?" The second guard questions, taking a step closer to him.

"The kingdom of Gwent," he replies, "I'm fleeing the war."

The guard glances over him and scoffs. "You sure don't look like the fighting type." He turns, meeting eyes with the other guard before shaking his head. "No wonder you ran."

Clay scoffs under his breath. He could fight, he knew he could. Maybe if he didn't have a killer assassin up his ass and had properly packed for such a long trip he wouldn't be in the shape he currently was.

"Do you have someone who could vouch for your character, kid?"

He looks back to the second guard, racking for the name Philza had fed to him.

"Technoblade."

Both guards gave him questionable looks before the first guard insisted he'd be back before he turned and walked through the gates of the kingdom.

"Take a seat," the second guard insisted, "you look ready to pass out."

He obliged, dropping his back to the ground before following after it. He hit the ground harder than he'd expected, pulling his bag onto his lap as he rummaged through it. He pulled the small amount of clean water he had left out, savoring every last drop as he waited for the other guard to return.

Half an hour later, that same guard returned with a man he didn't recognize. The second man was decked out in clean and shiny armor, a fluffy red cape thrown across his shoulders. He had abnormally long pink hair, which was thrown into a ponytail, and two large scars that reached from his jaw up to his cheek on either side of his face.

"Who are you?" He asked, crouching down in the grass in front of him.

He clenched his bag closer to his chest. "My name's Clayton," he replied uneasily, "Philza sent me."

The man Clay assumed to be Technoblade stood, humming as he turned his attention back to the other two guards. "I'll vouch for him." The guards nodded as Technoblade returned his attention to him, plucking his bag from his lap.

Again, he crouched before him, whispering very quietly into his ear, "I'm going to take you in, got it? Don't question what I do. Just follow my lead."

When he returned to the guards' quarters late that night, he hadn't expected anyone to be awake, let alone to be greeted by anyone. To his surprise, Techno was sitting in the entry room leaned up against the wall holding a candle.

"Dream," he addressed in a very matter-of-fact tone.

"Techno?" He replied cautiously, shutting the door behind him hard.

Techno pushed off the wall, the candle flickering dangerously in his hand. "I have information you're not going to like." His body stiffened as his fingers left the safety of the doorknob.

"Well, it's nice to see you too," he sarcastically said, bringing his arms up defensively against his chest.

"Yeah, yeah, nice to see you," Techno drawled out before flicking the candle he'd been holding right in front of his face. "This is serious, *Clay*."

He could practically feel the blood drain from his face at the use of his real name — the name he'd discarded years ago.

"What's wrong?" He quickly questioned, his eyes watching the flame cautiously.

"You can't let anyone know I told you this, and I mean *anyone*, got it?" He nodded quickly, watching carefully as Techno dropped the candle closer to their chests. "I overheard Wilbur talking with some guards outside of the gate today about one of the former guards here." Dream focuses on Techno's serious face now, watching the way his eyebrows drop and his lips press together firmly.

"You remember Quackity, right?"

At the mention of George's previous guard's name, he falters. He and George had *just* talked about him. "Don't tell me they found something out about him," he laughs nervously.

Techno's facial expression doesn't change, however. He doesn't laugh back. He doesn't reveal this is all a joke.

"He was a spy for The Kingdom of Gwent."

Dream feels like the world is suddenly caving in on him and Techno obviously notices because not even a second later there's a sturdy hand clapping onto his shoulder.

"Hey, *calm down*," Techno orders him sternly. "Do you remember a guy named Alex? He was a former guard."

He's teleported back to *that* night—the night he killed *him*. He vividly remembers the way Minx had charged after him once the bullet hit *him*, the way she turned to address the third man who'd been part of their party—*the party that was sent after him to bring him home*.

"Don't you dare leave his side, Alex!"

He stares directly at Techno, his mouth going dry, the words dying on the tip of his tongue. Instead, he nods in reply, his hands clenched into fists at his side.

"They found him, didn't they? They were coming back for him."

"Calm down, seriously, there is no way they know you're here, okay?" Techno insists, shaking his shoulder. "Does anyone here know what you look like without the mask other than me?"

Dream nods. "Skeppy and Sapnap. I've only taken it off once in front of them and my face was too purple to make out any distinctive features."

"Purple?" Techno parrots, faltering. "What happened?"

"Sapnap and I got into a fight, but that's beside the point. There's no way they'd be able to recognize me."

"And you haven't taken your mask off in front of anyone else, right?"

"Absolutely no one," Dream answered carefully.

Techno sighs, dropping his hand from his shoulder. "Then there should be no reason to freak out, okay? Maybe he decided it was best to leave because he didn't find anything. You've been careful."

Dream nods again, unable to find the right words to say. Too much was running through his head.

"Get a good night's rest, and just stay out of trouble, got it?"

"Yes, sir."

Techno gives him a weak smile before walking down the hallway and disappearing out of sight. Feeling worn for wear, Dream trudges to his shared room, ignoring the pain in his palms.

To his surprise, Techno wasn't the only one awake waiting for him. When he opened his bedroom door, a single candle was still lit. While Skeppy had been fast asleep, Sapnap was still wide awake, sitting at the end of his cot fidgeting.

The moment he stepped into the room, Sapnap's head rose. "Dream!" He spoke happily. The fight that had been waiting in Dream's shoulders left immediately at the loving and welcoming tone. With a smile, he waved back at Sapnap, shutting their bedroom door.

"Why are you back so late again?" Sapnap asked him as he made his way over to his belongings, already shrugging off his armor.

"Got caught up in stupid official business," he replies, already halfway through changing.

"Everything's in the last stages of planning for The Prince's party so they're really working hard on getting every detail right."

The lie comes naturally—and he feels sorry for it, truthfully.

"Oh," Sapnap replied. "That sucks."

"Kind of."

Once he's finished, he retires to his own cot. Sapnap turns himself over in his bed to face him, a lopsided smile pulled against his lips.

"I missed you, man," he laughs.

Dream can't help but smile, feeling familiarity between the two of them for the first time in days. "I missed you too, you idiot."

Unmasked, Finally

Chapter Summary

Dream is pretty sure he's trembling under his touch, but he can't be sure with how much he was trembling on his own. With anger, which was not directed to George, he brought the sword closer to the prince's neck, hands shaking.

"Do you really think you can hold your own?" He spat out bitterly, his knees buckling now. "Whose blade is pressed to your throat right now, George?"

Chapter Notes

hi guys! im not gonna lie, i dont really know how to use ao3 that well?
I've drawn out a few scenes from this book, specifically the one of dream and george first meeting, the scene where they first run out to the forest, and the "big" scene at the end of this chapter! you can find the art on my twitter and my Instagram @ darlingsvdream !

After another *long* day of meeting with royal advisors, tailors, and caterers, Dream is finally left alone with George in the main dining hall of the castle. He's almost grateful that George had yet another busy day. While George was kept busy, he didn't have to worry about the prince catching onto his anxious behavior. It spared him some time to settle down and take in the news he'd received yesterday.

The Kingdom of Gwent was sure to find him, eventually.

"Dream?" George beckoned from the head chair of the table. Pulled back to reality, he dipped his head, making his way from the corner of the room to the prince's side. "You look tired," George pointed out, lightly tapping at his arm.

"What makes you think I look tired? You can't even see my face," Dream questioned, a hint of laughter lacing his voice.

"You're hunched over, usually you have pretty perfect posture, almost better than mine."

Dream raises an eyebrow under his mask, amused, but not surprised that the prince read him so well once again. Beside him, a chair is kicked out and George motions for him to take a seat. He obliges, pulling the seat out the rest of the way before slumping against the soft cushions in relief.

"Didn't sleep too well last night," he admits, shrugging. "I guess you could say I received some disappointing news? It's not... It's not harmful to *you*, but it was still unsettling."

George nods, popping his elbows up onto the table. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"Ah, not really." He slumps against the chair even more, sinking into it. "My past is finally

catching up to me, you could say."

Out of the corner of his eye, he can see George staring at him. He's not doing it very discreetly. It looks like he's hanging off his every word, deeply interested in everything he has to say.

"Have you lived here your whole life?" George questioned, leaning closer to him.

"Oh, no. No, I haven't," Dream laughs, the slightest wheeze escaping him. He stiffens at the sound of it, coughing, hoping to mask the awkward laugh that he hates so much. "I came to Gantrick when I was seventeen or eighteen, I don't really remember."

"Oh, interesting. What made you come here?"

Dream again shrugs, focusing his eyes on the chandelier above them. "I was traveling for a while, searching for a place to settle down. One night I ended up crashing in some random man's barn. He suggested I come here, so I did. The rest is history." Dream stretches his legs out under the table, pulling his arms over his head in a leisurely manner. "Nothing really important brought me here. I wasn't even looking to become a guard."

"You were... Traveling by yourself, at seventeen?"

Turning his attention back to George, he can't help but catch the wary look he's sporting.

"My family was filled with a bunch of *unkind* folks, so I left them."

He doesn't miss the way George flinches, either.

"I'm really sorry to hear that." The prince sends him a small smile before turning his attention to the table. "Um, you said you never were looking to become a guard. What did you want to do with your life, then? And what persuaded you to join the guards?"

He watches as the prince fiddles with his thumbs for a moment before plucking his hands from the table.

"Well, aren't you just filled with questions today," Dream mused, pulling himself back up properly in his chair.

George snaps his attention back to him. "Sorry," he spluttered, biting his lower lip, "I feel like I know nothing about you—I was just curious. You don't have to answer if you don't want to."

For a second, Dream felt breathless. He wondered if it was normal to feel so giddy over such a small thing—to feel *ecstatic* over someone just simply wanting to know a little more about him.

"I didn't want to do anything with my life. I used to be pretty well off, money-wise. I wanted to travel the world, see everything I could." He paused, observing the way George's gaze seemed to soften. "That's what I meant when I said you and I are more alike than you think. I've been searching for freedom my whole life, George."

A steady silence builds between the two of them. George has still yet to tear his gaze away, to Dream's surprise.

"But uh— *anyway*, when I finally made it here and decided it was best for me to just settle down, I stayed with a friend. They insisted I go into guard training with them, so I did. I didn't have anything to lose or gain from it so it wasn't that big of a deal. I had been pretty skilled with a sword so it came pretty easily to me—the whole guard thing."

Dream exhales, feeling winded even more. George just smiles his way.

"I was expecting more of an extravagant story from you, Dream," George says with a laugh that sounded like a million soft chimes in his ears.

"I'm not an extravagant person, George," Dream insisted, "I'm actually a pretty boring person."

"You don't spark me as a boring person," George points out, waving a hand at him, "I mean, come on, *look at you*. You have the whole mysterious vibe going on. How can you be a boring person and keep your identity a secret?"

Dream simply shrugs, a smile tugging at his lips. "You got me there."

"Exactly," George smiles triumphantly. "But anyway, you know you're not the only one who's skilled with a sword, right?"

"Oh, really now?" Dream doesn't quite believe the prince.

"Yes, really. I've been practicing for a while actually."

"I find that hard to believe," Dream admitted bashfully, leaning across the table. "Who would have taught a prince like you to wield a sword?"

George lifts an eyebrow, leaning in closer as well.

They're close, Dream points out to himself. *Too close.*

"What's that supposed to mean? You don't think a prince should know how to fight?"

"I never said that," Dream politely corrected, "all I was saying was I'm surprised. This kingdom doesn't get into a lot of wars with people, I wouldn't have expected the royals to know how to defend themselves."

George laughs, pulling back suddenly. "I'm the only royal here who would know how to defend themselves and it's because I picked things up from my first guard. You know Bad used to be one, right?"

Taken back by the new information, Dream finds himself recoiling too, stiffening against the cushioned chair. "Bad, as in the *kitchen cook*, used to be a royal guard?"

Eagerly nodding, George grins. "He's the son of my parents' royal advisor. We've known each other since we were children. I watched him train to become a knight. I managed to pick up things here and there." He paused, cracking his fingers. "A few years ago he decided that being a guard wasn't for him. That's why Quackity became my new guard."

Dream can't help but stiffen at the mention of Quackity—*of Alex*.

"Oh," is all he manages to croak out.

He tries to ignore the way his limbs instantly kick into fight or flight mode as George continues speaking.

"I could show you my skills tonight if you're free."

"Are you asking me to a duel or something?" Dream muses.

"Okay look, I'm not good enough to take on a fully trained royal guard, but I can surely defend myself and hold my own." George huffs.

Dream just hums, pulling himself out of the dining room chair. "I'd like to see you try."

"Is it a date then?"

Dream pauses midway through pushing his chair in, his eyes flickering back to the prince who is still seated, a shit-eating grin plastered across his face.

"Sure," he speaks through gritted teeth, ignoring the way his heart clambered in his chest, "it's a date."

"Why did Philza send you here?"

They'd been walking down the kingdom path no longer than a minute before Technoblade started grilling him. They were shoulder to shoulder, a hand resting on his elbow as the guard pushed him along the path.

"He saved my life from an assassination attempt. I told him I'd been on the run for a while and he suggested that staying here would be my best option."

Technoblade doesn't seem to react to his story. "Who's trying to have you assassinated?"

Clay nervously rubs his hands together, his eyes fixated on his worn shoes. "The Kingdom of Gwent."

Suddenly, Technoblade comes to a full stop, pulling at his shoulder and forcing him to stop as well. With a tight grip, the guard pulls at his shoulder, forcing him to look his way. "What did you do?"

The way he speaks, it's not a question. It's a demand for him to answer. Guilt swarms in his gut uneasily as he stares up at Technoblade's stone-cold face. He can't bring himself to answer.

The guard doesn't seem to like his silence.

"I asked you a question. What did you do that you have a kingdom like that looking for your head?"

He licks his lips nervously. Can he even tell him the truth?

"I was running from the war," he lies, watching as Technoblade's facial expression morphs from the stone-cold still expression he'd been sporting to one of confusion.

"I don't do lies," he whispered, "so you either tell me the truth or I kick your ass back outside of the gates. Your choice." He stiffened at the sudden change in his voice, the monotone way he had turned into something dark and gritty.

Guilt wasn't the only thing shaking him now. Fear pulled at his chest now, urging him to bring his shaky hands into fists. He didn't have anything to lose by telling the truth, did he? He was damned if he did, damned if he didn't.

He had two options, and neither were looking good. His first choice was to refuse to tell the truth and go back to traveling on foot, but he was in no shape to continue on that way and if Minx did catch up to him there was no way he'd be saved. He would be brought back to Gwent and be killed or Minx would slaughter him on sight. His second choice was to tell him the truth and wait for him to tell the royals here, then ultimately get killed anyway.

It was a lose-lose situation.

He swallowed his pride.

"I'm running from the throne," he insisted, his voice shaky, "I murdered my royal guard when I made my escape."

Guilt.

It's all he can feel as Technoblade smirks at him slyly.

He finally admitted what he did to him out loud—he finally admitted what he did to Fundy. He was a selfish piece of shit for what he did. He had two others to shoot—two other possible targets—and he went after the only one who wouldn't have dared brought a weapon to him.

He was the worst possible type of person to exist now.

He begged his childhood friend to join the guard force, just so they could spend more time together. As he grew older and his eyes widened to the reality of his position, he began using the only friend he had to gain intel on the outside world so he could escape.

Fundy had dedicated his whole damn life to him, and that's how he repaid him? By killing him?

"So, you're Prince Clayton of Gwent," he whispers his proper title, "you're a lot different than the rumors make you out to be."

Clay can't help but stiffen at the title he hadn't heard in months, the weight of it hitting hard. No matter how far he ran, no matter how long he was gone from his home kingdom, he'd always be the damned prince of Gwent; the traitor who'd bring the kingdom to shambles.

Pulling back, Technoblade forces him to continue walking down the beaten path, his fingers tightening around his shoulder. "Never thought I'd be aiding a runaway prince, let alone a murderer at that," Techno laughed, kicking the back of Clay's leg softly, "lucky for you, I like your style."

Nothing Techno says brings him ease.

He felt sick to his stomach. He wanted nothing more than to throw himself off the path and empty the contents of his stomach; to just sit there and cry and beg for forgiveness, to ask whatever god was listening to him to rewind time so he could redo everything, but he couldn't.

It was too late to change anything now.

Neither of them say another word as they enter the busier streets of Gantrick. At some point, Techno leads him down a beaten path to a small shack. He doesn't knock when he swings open the door, practically throwing Clay in before he followed after him, slamming the door behind them.

As his eyes adjust to the dim lighting, Clay takes in the small home. There's a table in the middle of the main room, two broken looking chairs on either side of it. In the corner of the room sits a small stove and fireplace, the only thing that gave off any light into the room.

"Sit down," Techno ordered Clay. Following his instruction, Clay sat in the stiff and rickety chair of what he'd presumed was his dining room table.

Techno throws his bag onto the table, sweeping through the small room until he makes his way to a small cupboard in the corner of the room. "You're lucky Philza sent you my way," he

backhandedly commented as he threw the cupboard open, "I couldn't care less about the monarchy or government. I'd say that you escaping, no matter what you had to do, was justifiable."

Clay watches Techno's movements closely as he rummages through the contents of the cupboard.

"I really wouldn't agree with you," Clay mumbles, rubbing his hands across the uneven surface of the table, "I—I never meant to kill him. I just needed a distraction to get out."

Techno just shrugs. "What's done is done. Sometimes, we have to do things we never wanted to do to get what we want."

Clay just stares at Techno, feeling at loss for his words. Who the hell was this guy? Who even thought this way?

"That's... Dark."

"Life isn't butterflies and rays of sunshine, we're human after all. We do what we need to do to survive, even if it's bad." Techno rises, shutting the cupboard with something in his hand. "You'll get used to doing what you must to survive."

Suddenly, something is whipped across the table.

"Don't take this as me becoming your friend, got it?" Techno speaks, pulling the second chair out. "If Philza sent you my way, he obviously thinks there's something about you that's worth looking into. I'll do what I can to get you on your feet, but that's it."

With curious interest, Clay sits up in his chair, pulling the item that had been thrown at him into his hands. It's but a simple white mask with two dark eyeholes cut out of it.

"You have to keep your identity a secret. If I were caught harboring a kingdom's traitor, I'd be put on their hit list too."

Clay simply nods, holding the mask to his chest. "Thank you, Technoblade."

"Techno. Just Techno, is fine."

"Did you hear about Quackity, Tubbo?" Tommy speaks quietly from his side, nudging the other royal guard to his side.

"Wait, did Wilbur say something to you too?"

He tries to ignore the other royal guard's conversations, his eyes settled on the young prince who was animatedly speaking to his parents about his party plans. "Things are coming along great, mum! Dream and I actually just picked out the final color scheme for everything yesterday and..."

George's voice is quickly drowned out as Tommy nudges him. "Did Wilbur talk to you too, Dream?"

He clears his throat, ignoring the dull pain that accompanies it. "No, he didn't. Why? Is there something I should be informed of?"

Tommy shrugs, their shoulders bumping uncoordinatedly. "I don't know, probably not. He called me in earlier this morning to inform me about the information they found out about Quackity. Looks like he didn't go awol, after all."

"What do you mean he didn't go awol?" Dream asks dumbly, hoping neither Tubbo nor Tommy picked up on how obviously stained his voice sounds.

"Wilbur said some guards from the kingdom over came forward about harboring Quackity for a while," Tubbo fills him in, "Looks like Quackity had been an undercover spy for about two or three years for the kingdom of Gwent."

He flinches.

"I'm not sure what he thought he'd get out of being Prince George's guard," Tommy scoffs, "The man barely interacted with him, or us, for that matter. Bloody idiot."

"What's funny is he had volunteered to be his highness's guard, too," Tubbo laughs lowly, "but it didn't even seem like he was trying to get any information out of him."

"That's really weird," Dream commented, his eyes still focused on George, who looked so happy compared to the seriousness of the guard's conversation. "Do you think the Kingdom of Gwent is looking to start a war or something?"

"I really don't know," Tommy answered, fidgeting at his side. "The whole situation seems suspicious. Why would they send a spy here of all places? Isn't it like a week's travel there, anyway? What type of threat would we even oppose them?"

"That's a good point," Dream hummed thoughtfully.

"You don't think it has anything to do with their missing prince, do you?" Spoke Tubbo, who was nervously tapping his foot now. "I haven't been keeping up with anything revolving around that whole case, but I don't think they've found Prince Clayton."

Nervously, Dream took the soft skin of the inside of his cheek and bit down harsh enough to draw blood.

"What, do they think we're harboring their son or something?" Tommy barely conceals his laugh. "No one would willingly help someone from the Kingdom of Gwent, let alone that piece of shit."

Tommy is nudged into his side suddenly. Confused, Dream averted his attention for a moment, catching Tubbo's retreating hand. "*Tommy*," he hissed through gritted teeth. "I really don't think you're in any position to make any comments like that about that whole situation. We all know how the Kingdom of Gwent twists things, you can't just jump onto the assumption that what they said about him was true."

Tommy only huffs in reply.

Dream, on the other hand, feels sick to his stomach once again. The back of his neck feels clammy, his hands shaking uncontrollably at his sides. Clearing his throat once again, he absently brings a hand to cover his mouth.

Sadly, he doesn't miss the small specks of blood that landed on his glove.

Once dinner had been finished and the castle servants had cleared from the hallways, George was practically pulling Dream through the castle hallways, his hand latched onto his wrist like an excited child. "You should see the sword Bad gifted me for my twentieth birthday, it's *beautiful*."

Dream couldn't help but smile ecstatically, totally enthralled by the sudden shift in attitude around

him.

It had taken all but a minute for George to clamber up his tower and return back with a sheathed sword, holding it uncomfortably, yet triumphantly, over his head as if he'd won something. "I'm going to knock your socks off with this."

"Who said I was wearing socks?" Dream laughed, watching as George dropped the sword to his side with a bewildered face.

"*Dream?*" He snorted. "Got something you need to tell me?"

Both of them brushed off the joke, making their way to George's window. Clicking it open and throwing it up, Dream made his way through the window like he'd done it a thousand times before. Once he'd settled himself on the ground he turned around, grabbing the sword from George clumsily. "Where are we off to?" Dream questioned as George began slipping through the opened window.

The prince shrugged, dropping to the soft grass with a small thud. "Let's just go to the forest we were in the other day. We'll still be on the castle grounds." Agreeing silently, Dream pushed the sword back into George's greedy hands.

Their tread through the castle garden to the forest wasn't a long one, thankfully. The sun had fully set by now, the moon already hanging above them, the night time stars lighting the path for them. Dream was thankful that in the last nights of October, it wasn't bone-chilling cold. It was cold enough to make him uncomfortable and keep him wide awake, but not cold enough to send him fleeing back inside.

When they finally made it to the opening of the small forest, George made his way back to Dream's side, nudging his shoulder delicately. "If I can prove to you that I can hold my own, does that mean I'm one step closer to providing evidence for my argument?"

Dream settled a questioning gaze onto the brunette at his side, despite it being ineffective with his mask. "What do you even mean by that?"

"The last time we were out here you told me that you'd consider taking me outside of the kingdom walls if I could prove that you could trust me and that I could hold my own," George reminds him softly. "If I can prove I can hold my own, would you really reconsider taking me outside of the kingdom?"

Dream fixed a hard gaze onto the prince, stopping. George raised an eyebrow in return, stopping at his side.

Would he really consider taking George out of the kingdom walls, especially right now? After the whole 'manipulation' thing and 'Quackity' issue, maybe it wasn't a good idea. No—it wasn't just a *maybe*—it *was* a bad idea.

Dream knew what he'd be risking if he even thought about taking George outside of the kingdom walls, he *knew* it was the worst idea ever, and yet here he was actually *considering* it. He was right when he told George the other night that he wasn't a good royal guard. A good royal guard wouldn't be sneaking out in the night with his prince to duel—in fact, a good guard would actually be forcing the prince to go to bed and insist he never talk about leaving again.

He knew everything he was doing right now was wrong and yet, here he was; standing in the middle of a forest with the moon shining down disappointedly at him, Prince George staring up at

him like he held the answers to the universe.

Part of him was yelling—*screaming* at him to take George back to the castle and to tell him to knock this tomfoolery off, and yet, another part of him was finding this moment *just perfect*.

He hated that part of himself. Why couldn't he just do what was right?

"You know you don't have to actually consider it, right?" George finally spoke after a few beats of silence. "I get it if you don't want to even think about it."

"I'll consider it," Dream hurriedly replies, despite *knowing* he shouldn't have said it. "If you can hold your own, I'll genuinely consider it."

Before him, George's lips lifted upward, the very light freckles that danced on his cheeks crinkling. "Really, Dream? You're being serious?"

"Yeah," he'd mustered, "I'm being serious."

It was in that moment, in the warm glow that George's happiness brought, that Dream realized something. George was a ray of sunshine, and he was just a sunburn. He wasn't going to last long like this, was he?

"It means a lot that you're considering it, really," George hurriedly spoke, taking a step closer to him. "Now, want to see some sick swordsmanship?" George's nose crinkles just the slightest and Dream can't help the smile that pulls across his face happily.

"You're such an idiot," he laughed teasingly, fondness spilling over in his tone. Lightly, he pushed at George's shoulder, forcing the prince to take a step back. "I'm going easy on you, alright?"

"What, are you saying you're better than me or something?"

"No," Dream drawled out, his hand slipping to the hilt of his sword. The familiarity of the action brings comfort to him, easing his racing heart to slow down. "I'm just saying I don't feel like seeing a skewered prince tonight."

"That genuinely sounds like you think you're better than me, Dream," George sighed despite the smile he sported.

"I mean... I am the trained guard, after all. I think that counts for something right?"

George shakes his head, unsheathing the sword in his hand. "I guess."

Dream's eyes followed George's hands carefully, watching as he removed the sheath of his sword carefully, revealing a beautiful longsword that looked like it had yet to seen the light of day. The handle had a beautiful sapphire jewel, while words he couldn't quite make out were engraved into the side of the blade itself.

At least George was right, the sword was beautiful—but it surely wasn't as beautiful as the site before him was.

Standing before him, George's cheeks flushed a dark pink, the moonlight that seeped between the barren tree limbs giving his pale skin a sort of a soft glow. He was still wearing his fancy clothes, his cape resting easily against his broad shoulders as he lifted the sword evenly enough to cut his face into two symmetrical halves.

He almost looked godly, and it scared Dream. It scared Dream just how *attractive* George truly was to him. He was *not* supposed to feel this way about him.

A hefty sigh leaving his lips, he unsheathed his own sword which had seen many days in battle compared to George's. Falling into his normal fighting stance, he sought familiarity in the new ground he was treading on with the prince.

"I'll let you take the first strike, *princess*."

George rolls his eyes, falling into a similar stance as him. "Wow, you're so thoughtful Dream."

"I know, right?"

That's the last comment Dream makes before falling into complete silence, his feet moving to circle George. The prince's eyes follow him carefully, his own feet following after him. Dream readjusts his grip on his two handed longsword, holding it over his left shoulder wearily, waiting for George to make a move.

Thankfully he doesn't have to wait long for George to slide forward, his sword aiming for his exposed left shoulder sloppily. Without much thought, he's moving his sword to intercept George's attack, their blades clashing together with a loud clunk before Dream has managed to bring George's sword down and away from him.

"Try again," Dream insisted as George retreated back slightly, bringing his sword back up and readjusting his grip on the hilt.

This time, George advances on him faster than he did before, his sword coming dangerously close to Dream's face. Almost surprised by the attack, he lept backwards, slapping George's blade aside again.

Regaining his composure, Dream circled away from him, keeping his sword in motion and continually changing his guard and stance. "Not bad," he commented, pleasantly surprised. "At least you have the right idea."

George chuckles at the half-assed compliment, raising his sword one last time. "Bet I try again?"

Dream just shrugs, moving in closer to George. "You know how to counter an attack, right?"

"I think so, *why*—" George doesn't have enough time to question him. Dream moved in on him fast, raising his sword high enough to give the inexperienced prince a moment to analyze the citation. Again to his surprise, his attack is countered by a high and striking horizontal slash as George pushes his blade aside. The blow is enough to offset Dream's steady stance, causing the tip of his sword to fly back at him dangerously.

He hummed pleasantly, backing away from George with a smile. "Okay," he chuckled, fixing his sword in his hand. "So, you're not *that* bad, huh?"

"I can take the heat," George insisted with a playful grin.

"Well that's good to hear, then."

They continue on like this for a while, Dream believes. They go back and forth from attacking one another to countering each other's attacks easily, dodging the trees around them carefully. Despite some of the sloppiness in a handful of George's moves, he has a good understanding of what he's doing with a blade.

It reminds Dream a lot of how he was before he came to Gantrick. He knew that despite the small skill level George had, he could quite easily handle his own. It eased a good amount of his nerves, thankfully.

After stepping back from one of George's more coordinated attacks, he lifted a hand, dropping his own sword to his side. "How are you with sneak attacks?"

"How would I know?" George practically barks out a laugh, dropping his own sword. "You're the only person I've ever had the chance to spar with."

"I'm surprised you're this good for someone who has never gone up against anyone before."

George rolls his eyes, his shoulders dropping. "Okay, well I mean, I *have* sparred with Bad before but we were like teenagers, and it was with those dingy wooden swords you're given when you're a child joining the guard force."

This time, Dream can't even help himself as his sword drops to the grass beside him and the *worst* laugh escapes him. He's practically *wheezing*, for God's sake.

"Okay, ha ha, very funny Dream," George grumbled from above him. "Pick your ass up, your wheezing is what's gonna get us caught."

A warm hand settles on the back of his exposed neck, quite literally shutting him up.

"Sorry... Sorry," he mumbled under his breath, gathering himself together before pulling himself up. George retreated his hand rather quickly, still keeping *way* too close to him. "You should know how to both execute and counter a sneak attack. If you can do that, I'll say you're able to hold your own fairly well."

"Okay," George said softly, "Seems fair enough."

"I'll let you go first," he insisted as he turned his back to the prince, readying his sword, "do your worst."

He blinked owlishly at the tree in front of him for a moment, straining his ears to listen for any movement. A few beats of patient silence passed as he tapped his fingers against the hilt of his sword. Distantly, he doubted George was even going to make a move for a moment.

When another second of silence hit him, he found himself turning his head slightly over his shoulder, "George—"

Movement came swinging into his vision as George's sword came *right* at him. He was a second too late—*a* second too late to react. Before he could even fathom what exactly was happening, the tip of George's sword scraped against the side of his mask with a horrifying sound before it bumped against his ear and to the side of his head. The sound of fabric tearing echoed in his ears before the world around him brightened tenfold.

As a wave of coldness hit his face, he was moving faster than he *ever* would, crashing into George harder than Sapnap had hit him a week ago. He didn't think as he forced his armored arm around George's neck, pulling him flush against his chest. In the same movement, he was knocking George's sword away from him, kicking it with force away from him.

With George's back pressed against his chest, his sword hovering just above his neck, Dream's eyes scanned the ground around him with wide eyes.

There, laid beside George's sword, was his mask.

The only thing that was keeping his identity a secret.

"I'm sorry," George quickly breathed out. "Fuck, I'm sorry—I didn't mean—I wasn't aiming—"

Dream is pretty sure he's trembling under his touch, but he can't be sure with how much he was trembling on his own. With anger, which was not directed to George, he brought the sword closer to the prince's neck, hands shaking.

"Do you really think you can hold your own?" He spat out bitterly, his knees buckling now.
"Whose blade is pressed to your throat right now, George?"

George doesn't reply, doesn't even *breathe* as he stares down at the blade of Dream's sword.

Dream's own eyes fluttered down to his blade, watching as their distorted reflections swayed back at him. He felt like he could be sick.

"Don't turn around, okay?" His voice cracks, every single bit of fight and anger leaving his system in an instant. "Do *not* turn around."

George suddenly slumps against him, his head dropping against Dream's shoulder. It's such a mundane gesture that it has Dream dropping his shoulders in relief.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, a ragged breath leaving him. "I *was* aiming for your shoulder."

Dream doesn't dare to move, his eyes focused on his blade. How the *hell* was he going to get himself out of this one? Would George even recognize him? God, what a stupid thought. He never even saw George before he became his guard, how in the *world* would George know about what he would even look like.

He lowered his blade, keeping a steady hand sprawled against George's rapidly moving chest. "I'm sorry too," he mumbled into the crown of George's head. "I... I didn't mean to lash out on you like that."

"It's okay," George reassures him, his hand resting over the one he had sprawled against his chest.

That stood there for a moment, neither of them speaking as Dream just held George against his chest, his own sword dropping to the ground beside their feet. His heart was racing, his hands shaking as he hesitantly wrapped his other arm around George.

"I'm closing my eyes," George announced after a few moments, twirling in his grasp with his head hung down. He didn't even realize what the prince was doing until he felt George's arms wrap around his midsection, his forehead resting against his armored shoulder.

It was an awkward hug that had Dream taken back for a moment.

"Why do you make this so hard?" George grumbled into his cloak.

Dream brought his arms around George tighter, resting his chin on the prince's head slowly. "What do you mean?" He questioned, his voice sounding hoarse and strained.

"You hide your face and you're so damn vague about everything in your life. I just want to know you, Dream," George sighed, nuzzling his head closer to his shoulder. "Are you really that scared about opening up? Or is it that you don't trust me, because that's what it seems like."

He paused, taking in a deep and shaky breath that had his whole body rattling. "I guess I don't really deserve to know anything about you—or to even have your trust in the first place. I'm sorry."

"It's a me thing," he replied shakily. "It's just a me thing. God, Sapnap and Skeppy didn't even know what I looked like until a week ago, and even then my face was so bruised and swollen they couldn't really make out what I genuinely looked like."

George practically deflated in his arms.

"My past is more complicated than I made it out to be."

"I thought so," George hummed thoughtfully, "and to think you tried to pass yourself off as a boring person."

Dream can't help the nervous burst of laughter that escapes him after that.

In a second's time, he weighs out all of his options. He could just tell George to keep his eyes closed and retrieve his mask, fix it, and have the whole situation be over with. It didn't need to be a bigger situation than it already was. Or, he could just open up for once and let George truly see him.

That was stupid, wasn't it? Didn't Techno and him *just* talk about how important it was to keep his identity a secret?

How bad was it he didn't really care anymore?

"Hey, George?"

"Hm?"

"Would you tell anyone if I showed you my face?"

There's another beat of silence.

"Who do I have to tell, Dream? What would I even have to gain from it other than being able to put a face to your voice?" George replies hurriedly, raising his head just the slightest. "Is it bad I really want to know what you look like?"

"No, it's not," Dream replied truthfully, "is it bad I want you to know what I look like?"

"No. No, not at all."

After another beat of silence, Dream finally makes up his mind, and he knows eventually he may have to pay for it. With delicate hands, he unraveled himself from George's grasp, stepping back just enough for George to look up at him.

It feels like the world stops there, in that moment, with the moonlight shining down on the two of them and George's eyes looking up wide at him.

"I'll never be able to make it up to you, how I treated you before was unacceptable, but right here and right now, I am saying this with all the truth I can muster; you are the *most handsome* person I have ever met."

George's words hit him heavily when he feels George's hands reach out for his, pulling them both into his grasp.

"It— *um*, it means a lot to me that— *that* you felt comfortable enough to show me your face," George stumbled over his words, suddenly looking away with a laugh on the tip of his tongue. "Thank you, Dream. Thank you for putting a little trust in me."

Dream's brain can't keep up with everything happening, his face *burning* with bashfulness, his heart racing, his damn hands shaking in George's grasp.

"Yeah— *yeah*, it's no problem at all, George," he coughed out awkwardly, squeezing at George's hands lightly. "I'm trusting you with *this*, okay?"

"Mhm... yeah..."

Questions Left Unanswered

Chapter Summary

"Excuse me?" Dream can't help the way he flinches, backing up against the hallway wall defensively. The second his shoulders hit the wall he imagines himself being engulfed by it, being swept away from whatever this conversation was becoming. "What is that supposed to mean?"

At last, Techno's face shifts, the corner of his lips curling upward slowly. "I'm not stupid, Clay, and I know you're not either." The guard takes a step closer to him, the tips of their boots brushing against one another. "The Dream I knew never cared about any royals before. Prince George shouldn't be an exception."

The walk back to the castle makes Dream feel like he's walking on pins and needles. Surprisingly, it genuinely felt like a weight had been lifted off his shoulders. It wasn't a big difference, but it was *something*.

Despite the relief he felt, he couldn't help but feel helplessly awkward at George's side as his fingers tapped against his mask. The two had barely spoken to one another since they'd retrieved their swords and started their way back to the castle.

Dream, hoping to find a distraction from the storm that was stirring inside of him, threw all of his attention onto the now beaten mask in his hands. There was a gash across the side of it where his cheek would normally be along with a broken strap. The gash wasn't deep enough that it cut through the whole mask, but it was definitely noticeable. It would be a cool '*battle scar*' at least.

As his fingers started to fiddle with the now tethered fabric, George finally broke their silence.

"Sooo," he drawled out in a half-whisper, "Was I right? Did I knock your socks off?"

Dream couldn't help but glare over at the prince, pleasantly surprised by the fact his peripheral vision was more clear than it had been in years. "I think you managed to knock more than my socks off," he pointed out, waving his mask in front of the prince.

George's eyes followed his movements, his lips curling up sourly. "*Right...*"

"That's beside the point, though," Dream hurriedly imputed upon realizing the way George was starting to cringe in on himself. "I was actually impressed. Wouldn't say that you hold guard worthy skills, but it seems that you can at least hold your own."

"You think so?"

"Yeah," he sighed in reply, "I think so."

George practically *beamed* at the half-assed compliment, taking a confident step closer to Dream's side so their shoulders brushed as they walked. "At least I did one thing right tonight." Dream just hums, almost disapprovingly, as his grip tightens around the little white mask in his hands.

Even at their slow pace, it didn't take the pair long to return to the opened window of George's

tower. With trembling hands, Dream tied together the strap of his mask, pushing it back over his face hurriedly as George stopped in front of him.

"Putting it back on so soon?"

He could have *sworn* George sounded disappointed.

"Not everyone gets the luxury of seeing my *handsome* face like you did, George," he finds himself wittedly replying. "Getting to see my face is a *treat*."

Once he's pushed his mask back on comfortably, he mourns the loss of the cool midnight air brushing up against his face for a moment. With a huff, he turned his attention back to the prince who was clutching his sword like a helpless child before him.

"Uh... Thank you for tonight." The prince bowed his head, looking everywhere but at him. "It means a lot that you actually took the time to spar with me and... you know, share something so personal with me."

Dream, the damned sap he was, couldn't help but flourish at the sweet words spoken to him. "Of course," he found himself saying, a boost of confidence striking him. "I'm glad that if it had to be anyone on the other end of the blade that broke my mask, it was you." He cleared his throat, taking in a deep breath. "We could spar again sometime if you'd like."

He doesn't know why he offers it, but he does. Maybe it was because he knew it gave them an excuse to hang out more, or maybe he just liked the close proximity it forced the two of them to be in, but either way, Dream knew he wouldn't mind sparing with George again.

"Oh." George seems to be taken back by the offer, his head bobbing up with surprise. "I would like that."

"Great... great!" He sputtered awkwardly, clapping his hands together. "I should probably get going before someone notices I haven't returned."

"Right, right," George hurriedly agreed before he turned to his window, dropping his sword over the other side of it and pulling himself through it with one swift motion. He turned quickly, his eyes landing on Dream. "I'll see you tomorrow?"

"I'll see you tomorrow," Dream answered more affirmatively, confused by George's timidly asked question.

With a curt nod, George began turning from the window, the ghost of a frown playing on his face. "Good night, Dream."

"Good night, *princess*." The prince just sighed, slamming the window shut before swiftly walking away into the depths of the castle.

Dream lingers for a moment longer, watching the window like something else would happen, like another life-changing moment would hit him; but to no one's surprise, nothing happens. With stiff shoulders and a dry mouth, Dream made his way around the castle garden and back onto the beaten gravel path that would lead him to the guard's quarters.

Mindlessly, his fingers traced the side of his mask where George had struck him, mapping out the gash. The mask he'd taken care of for five years finally had a flaw.

No, it wasn't a flaw.

His hand dropped numbly to his side as a million thoughts swarmed his head at once.

The mark in his mask, the mark *George* had left, was anything but a *flaw*. He hated the way his mind started working around it, thinking back to the moment in the forest where he really just said *fuck it* and let the prince see his face. The facade he'd created, the one he'd sported for five years without a hitch, was crumbling at George's fingertips.

He cringed in one himself, thinking back to Techno's warnings and Sapnap's lectures. He was going against *everything* they were saying, *everything he used to stand for*. He would never allow just anyone to see his face, never in his right mind would he even allow himself to get this close with another *royal*, either.

What was so different about George?

What was it about the prince that it had him *caving* at his fingertips? What was so different about him that it had Dream orbiting around him like a lost moon? He hadn't even known the prince for longer than a month and here he was, crumbling at just the *thought* of him.

There was *something* about him, something he couldn't quite put his finger on. He didn't know what it was, he didn't even *care*, honestly.

All he knew was how *easy* it would be to get swept up in the prince. He was so *captivating*, so charming and enthusiastic; he had Dream's full attention now, and it was clear.

It was in that moment, as he stood on the uneven gravel with his hands clenched at his sides, that Dream realized something he didn't want to acknowledge.

If he really had nothing to lose, Dream would just allow himself to be swept up in George *so easily*, and *that* was a *scary* realization.

His limbs were burning, crying out for him to stop torturing them. Usually, he had someone to tell him when to stop; Fundy had always been so on top of him about taking care of himself, urging him to take breaks. Here he had no one but himself and Techno, and neither were stopping him as he continued to relentlessly beat down on the training dummy in Techno's makeshift backyard.

The mask he wore sat uncomfortably on his face as he threw another blow onto the dummy, his shoulders crying in protest.

It had been two weeks now since Techno had taken him in. He was practically back to his full health now after having slept a whole week and then some. Despite how happy he'd been with his recovery, he found himself tearing down all his progression as he pushed his body's limits.

He had to get better at fighting.

If this was his life now, he would never be free from his parent's wrath. Minx would probably just be one of many assassins sent his way. He had to prepare. He could not be put in the position Minx had sent him into again.

A low whistle is what finally pulls him away from the dummy.

"I didn't even think you knew how to properly wield a sword," Techno comments with raised eyebrows. "Who taught you that?"

"What, are you kidding me?" Clay laughed, lowering his sword. "I'm from Gwent, everyone knows

how to fight."

"Fair enough," Techno hmms thoughtfully before he shuts the back door to his house. "So now I'm harboring what looks like a serial killer."

Clay can't help the way he stiffens. "That's one way to put it?"

Shrugging, Techno made his way over to Clay, leaning up against the training dummy with half-hearted interest.

"People are going to think it's weird that a civilian knows how to fight. If anyone ever catches you training like this, we're going to be in some serious trouble."

Clay raises an eyebrow, despite knowing Techno can't see his face. "Okay...? So what do you suppose I do then, not train?"

"Never said that," Techno quickly interjects. "It's simple, just enlist in the guard force."

Taken back by the suggestion, Clay can't help the stiff laughter that escapes him. "You're kidding, right?"

"No. Why would I ever joke?" Techno deadpans, crossing his arms over his chest. "If you enlist in the guard force, you can use a secondary nickname, keep a low profile, no one will ever question how you know how to fight, and you'll be able to get even better training. I think it's a perfect solution."

Despite everything thrown at him, Clay only latches onto one thing he said. "Secondary nickname?"

"Yeah. Everyone picks a nickname if they don't feel comfortable using their real name. You really think my name's Technoblade?"

Clay flounders. "Of course not!"

"Okay, good. I still think it's a good idea. No one ever questions a guard for being secretive either. We all do what we must to keep ourselves and this disgusting kingdom safe."

Clay thinks back to what Techno first told him when he took him in. 'Don't question what I do. Just follow my lead.' So far, Techno had shown to be reliable. He helped him get back onto his feet, kept him hidden, and was trying to help him even more. Why shouldn't he trust his suggestions?

"Okay," Clay gives in easily. "I'll do that then."

Dream freezes at the fingers that trail across his arm. He could faintly make out the feeling of a tape measure against their hand, the coldness of it seeping through the shirt he was wearing.

"I think he looks good, your highness. What do you think?"

Three pairs of eyes are on him, unsettlingly. The first pair belongs to the tailor, who was making alterations to his outfit for George's party. The second belonged to the royal advisor, whose eyes were staring him down like a falcon. The third belonged to the prince himself, who stood anxiously beside his royal advisor, his arms crossed over his chest.

"He looks fantastic," George returned with a beaming smile.

Dream ignores the way his heart flutters at the comment.

"You're all set then, Dream," the tailor announced from behind him, finally dropping his arm.

With a breath of relief, he steps off the pedestal he'd been standing on, turning his attention to the tailor. "Thank you, it looks amazing."

The girl just smiles, nodding as she begins to pick up the silks from the ground.

Out of the corner of his eye, he catches himself in the elongated mirror that's propped up on the wall. It had been a while since he'd worn such fancy clothes. They were a little tighter than he wanted them to be, but at least they brought out his figure nicely.

"Dream," the royal advisor suddenly calls out. Turning his head over his shoulder, he hummed in reply, catching the advisor's eyes. "Please don't tell me you'll be attending his highness's party with your mask on."

Dream can't stop the way his shoulders raise defensively.

"Ranboo," George suddenly scolds, turning to the royal advisor with a sour face. "I have no issue with him wearing his mask."

The royal advisor doesn't react. "I'm just saying I think it would be inappropriate for such a fancy event."

Dream doesn't even know what to say as he watches George turn to Ranboo, unfolding his arms. "He's fine."

The advisor shrugs. "I just think it would be *nice* if he followed the appropriate attire, that is all. He will be in the presence of the king and queen, as well as a bunch of other royals. He should look *presentable*."

Annoyance prickles at Dream's skin.

"He's been in the presence of the king and queen multiple times with his mask, they're just fine with it," George insists. "If anyone else has an issue with it they can bring it to me. They're guests in *my* kingdom. They should not expect us to bend to their every desire." The sudden shift in George's tone takes everyone in the room back.

"While I understand where you're coming from, your highness, my point still stands," Ranboo sighs, folding his hands delicately. "This is a high-class party, if he's going to be a guest he should at least look the part, shouldn't he? No offense, Dream, but the whole smiley face doesn't really scream sophistication to me."

If there was one thing Dream hated in this world more than anything, it was being made to look a fool, and that's what he was being made to look at this moment. Royal Advisor Ranboo was right, this *was* a high-class party, he should look the part of being George's sophisticated plus one.

Truthfully, he *really did* forget about the whole 'having to keep his identity a secret' bit when he decided to make up his mind.

"Ranboo, I don't think you have the place to—"

"Your highness," he found himself interrupting. George's eyes flew to him surprisingly, his eyebrows pinched. "It's fine, really. I won't wear my mask."

George just stands there looking at him like he'd grown a second head. "Dream—"

"That's great to hear," Ranboo smiled, "thank you, Dream. This party will go off without a hitch. Now, all we must do is find a guard who will take your place as George's guard for the night."

"Clay." His voice was so quiet in the dark stable, the snow that was falling from the sky in front of them sounding louder than he did. He sounded like he could shatter like glass at any second. "I have to tell you something before you leave."

"Who said I was leaving?" He replied defensively, pulling at the fleece cloak around his shoulders. "You jump to the weirdest conclusions, Fundy."

A warm hand grabbed his shoulder, pulling him away from the stable door with force. "Don't play stupid with me, Clay. Please."

There, wrapped up in his guard's arms, Clay deflated. "I'm not playing stupid," he murmured, lightly pushing away at Fundy's chest. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Fundy just frowned at him, pulling his arms back like Clay had burned him. "I saw you packing some things last night. I know what you're thinking about doing."

"I wouldn't leave."

The guard rolls his eyes, he was smiling a little, a smile with a twist to it, like the smile of a child who is determined not to weep. "Yes, you would. I know you better than that."

"I wouldn't leave you," Clay lied, trying to sound as convincing as he could. "I was just cleaning up. That's all."

He felt bad for lying. He never really wanted to leave Fundy, but he knew he had to. Fundy deserved a better life than being on the run all his life. He deserved better than just catering to Clay's every need.

"As your guard, your highness, I am obligated to tell you that I truly don't believe you, and I believe that it is in your best interest to stay," Fundy sighed, wrapping his arms around himself. "But as your friend, I wouldn't blame you. I know you're not happy. I wasn't lying when I told you I'd be happy for you, wherever you ended up." Clay stared up at Fundy in awe, watching as small snowflakes that blew in from the open stall door landed in the guard's sandy hair.

"Fundy—"

"Can I please tell you what I wanted to tell you?" He cut him off quickly, pulling his arms around himself tighter. "Before I lose the nerve to."

Clay didn't like the way Fundy was speaking, he didn't like how familiar it sounded. "Fundy..." He warned darkly, his hands curling to fists at his side.

"I don't expect you to reply, Clay," Fundy bit back, "I really don't care if you don't feel the same way. I never have, and you know that." Clay knew where this was going. It sounded awfully similar to how Fundy first confessed to him two years ago, on the night of his sixteenth birthday.

He couldn't love Fundy the same way he loved him; not here, not in this life. Fundy deserved better than he could give. He did love Fundy like a friend, though, and the last thing he wanted to hear before he deserted his beloved friend was yet again another confession.

"Don't do this to me," Clay pleaded, "please."

"I still love you, you know," Fundy sighed, adverting his attention to the snowing scene before them. "I would do anything for you if it meant you were happy."

"Stop it," Clay warned.

"The guards will be changing shifts the second the sun peaks over the horizon. If you're looking for a moment to slip out, that'll be the best moment," Fundy mumbles. "Conveniently, I will still be sleeping."

Clay fixes a hard gaze on his guard, blinking rapidly.

"Fundy—"

"It's okay, Clay," Fundy hushed him. "It's okay."

"His name is Sapnap, you said?" The royal advisor, Ranboo as Dream finally learned, asked as they walked the gravel path toward the guards' quarters.

"Yeah, that's it," Dream replied, watching the advisor and George carefully out of the corner of his eyes.

"What a peculiar name," Ranboo commented, nudging at the prince at his side. "Wouldn't you think, your highness?"

"He literally goes by Dream and you think Sapnap's more *peculiar*?" George bubbly laughs. "At least his name sounds more like a *name*." Dream couldn't help but scoff under his breath, rolling his eyes under his mask.

Ranboo just hummed, tapping at the clipboard in his grasp. "I guess you have a point there, your highness."

The three of them fall into silence as they make their way to the door of the guards' quarters. Being the gentleman he should be, Dream opened the door for them, motioning for them to walk in.
"After you, your highness."

As Ranboo stepped into the quarters cautiously, George sent him an exasperated glance, sticking his tongue out slightly before stepping in after Ranboo. Whatever chatter had been occurring in the hallways silence pretty quickly once they realized who'd entered.

"Your highness," a familiar voice greeted. In the corner of the entry room stood Techno, who had been talking to one of the other guards. He glanced over to Dream wearily before motioning to the other guard to leave. "Dream."

"Techno," Dream greeted stiffly. "Is Wilbur or Sapnap still here?"

Techno's eyes flickered to the prince and advisor at his side before settling back on Dream. "They were both in the kitchen last I checked."

He nodded, pointing down to one of the hallways. "Move that way, it'll be the first door on the left," Dream instructed Ranboo, who took the lead and began walking once again. The second George followed after him, Techno was at his side, grabbing his arm.

"What happened to your mask?" Techno whispered into his ear, squeezing his arm.

"I'll tell you later," Dream whispered back, pulling away from Techno's grasp. A stuttered breath escaped him, his heart rattling against his chest.

It was always something, wasn't it? He couldn't hide anything from anyone for long.

"Did you fuck up?" He doesn't answer. "I'll take that as a yes. How bad's the damage?"

"Pretty bad," Dream answered. "I'll tell you later. It's a long story."

Dream moved quickly, following after George's footsteps as he heard Techno scoff from behind him. Thankfully, he caught up with them just in time to enter into the kitchen behind them. True to Techno's word, Wilbur and Sapnap were in the kitchen, both of their attentions already on them.

"Your highness," Wilbur greeted first, bowing. "What has brought you here, today?"

Sapnap doesn't say a word, his eyes settling on Dream, clearly confused.

"We are here to speak about arrangements concerning his highness's party," Ranboo explains, extending his hand to Wilbur. "My name is Ranboo, I am the Royal Advisor for Prince George."

Wilbur takes his hand, shaking it firmly. "Wilbur Soot, I'm the head guard here. This is Sapnap, one of my fellow guardsmen."

Ranboo dips his head, a smile pulling at his lips. "Splendid. Just the two we were looking for. Are you both free to speak?"

When they both simply nod, Dream suggested they take a seat at the rickety table. He doesn't miss the way Ranboo visibly cringes as he takes his seat at the head of the table. "In any case," Ranboo begins, dropping his clipboard to the table. "To fill you both in, we're looking for a guard to take Dream's place as George's personal guard for his party. Dream suggested that Sapnap would be the best pick for the job."

Both guards look at him, confused.

"Why are you looking for someone to take Dream's place?" Sapnap questions. "Isn't that, you know, Dream's job?"

"His highness has decided that Dream will be his plus one to the party," Ranboo answers, as if it's no big deal, "kind of weird, I know, but Prince George *insisted* he attended as a guest."

Dream can't help the way he rolls his eyes under his mask.

"Oh. This is my first time hearing *that*," Sapnap pointedly says, turning his focus onto Dream. "Wonder why I didn't hear about that before?"

"Sapnap," Wilbur corrects from his side, tapping his shoulder gently. "Forgive him, he can be quite blunt sometimes. As you were saying?"

Ranboo nods. "Right. In any case, Wilbur, I know you will be there doing the extra detailing, so Dream suggested that Sapnap take over in his place for the night. I wanted to get your input on the situation."

"Oh, I see!" Wilbur exclaimed, very forcefully faking the smile on his face. "I agree with Dream, then. Sapnap is one of our best guards. It would be a great decision."

"That is fantastic to hear. Sapnap, would you be okay with this?"

Sapnap doesn't take his eyes off Dream as he replies. "I would *love* to take Dream's place for the night."

"Splendid!" Ranboo clapped, standing up from the table. "Why don't you guys get acquainted with one another? I must finish getting some last-minute things together. It was a pleasure to meet you both, Wilbur and Sapnap."

Wilbur looks up to the advisor, nodding. "It was a pleasure to meet you as well."

As Ranboo makes it to the door, he fixes a hard glare Dream's way. "Dream, please remember to escort his highness back in time for his fitting before dinner."

"I will," he replies coolly, "thank you."

Wilbur stands too. "I will let you guys speak, if you need me I'll be in the common room."

The second Ranboo and Wilbur's footsteps are out of ear range, a cold hand slaps the back of his neck, a gasp following. "You are an *idiot*," George, finally speaking, hissed at him.

Looking back to the prince at his side, he gasped too. Did George actually just *smack him*?

"What do you *mean*?"

"The whole situation in the fitting room, I had *your* back. There was literally *no* reason for you to agree to Ranboo." George points a finger dangerously close to his mask. "I don't know what you think you have to prove to him, but it's absolutely nothing."

"George—"

"What did he do?" Sapnap interjects, leaning across the table with pointed interest.

George turned to the other guard, his eyebrows raised. "He told Ranboo he'd attend my party without his mask on, after I told them both it didn't matter if he wore it."

"You did *what*?" Sapnap turned to him, smacking his hands which laid on the table. "Since when are you okay with just *not* wearing your mask?"

Dream doesn't come up with a reasonable answer. There really was *no* reason for him to agree to not wearing it but that stupid little part of him that hated being seen as a fool just had to pop out.

"I don't know," he replies with. "I just... I thought it'd be more appropriate?"

"I can just tell Ranboo you changed your mind," George insists, "it's fine. You shouldn't feel pressured to not wear it for my party, okay?" He reaches out to him, shaking his shoulder slightly.

"We'll see," Dream replies with instead of just agreeing, shrugging George's hand off his shoulder. With an almost pained expression, George cleared his throat, turning his attention back to Sapnap.

"Sorry about that. It's a pleasure to actually meet you, Sapnap." George extends his hand across the table with a warm smile.

"Uh, it's no issue?" Sapnap replied, cautiously taking the prince's hand. "It's a pleasure to meet you as well, your highness. May I ask what you meant by '*actually meet you*,' though?"

As George retracts his hand, he *snorts*. It's the type of laugh that has Dream's skin prickling. "As long as you agree to drop the formalities, then yes you can," George replies leisurely.

Sapnap looks like he's about to have a damn *stroke*.

"I mean, are you sure, your highness—"

"Please, I honestly *hate* the formalities. Just George is fine," George reassures him before settling back into his chair. Dream can barely contain a laugh as he watches Sapnap's face screw up with confusion.

"I mean, okay then," Sapnap hummed, his eyes turning in interest to Dream, who just shrugged with a smile.

"Great, then yes, I can tell you what I meant by that."

For the better half of an hour, Dream just sits and listens to George and Sapnap's conversation, carefully observing Sapnap's expressions as the two of them interacted. George explains to Sapnap the second time he'd arrived at the guard's quarters to pick Dream up, having walked in on him sleeping.

Dream's kind of surprised to see Sapnap laugh at the prince's antics.

"You're insane, Dream. You know that, right?"

Techno's eyes fell on him tiredly as he shook his head disappointedly. Dream just sighed, his eyes flickering from the guard to the floor as if he were a child scolded by his parents. He knew he had no right to be upset when Techno was right, he had put himself in this position, after all. He willingly showed George his face, he willingly said he'd attend his party without his mask; he had done all of those things on his own free will *knowing* the consequences and what he had to lose.

"I know," he answered sadly. "I know."

Techno moved across the hallway in one swift motion, grasping Dream's arm in his hand. "Is it too late to take George up on his offer and just tell Ranboo you can't attend without your mask?"

"No, it isn't," he replied, knowing very well that George would tell Ranboo even if it was last second "I just don't want to look like a fool, Techno."

"Sometimes you have to swallow your pride. You know that, right?" Techno loomed over him, a cold expression spread across his face. He hated that he couldn't read Techno like he could read practically everybody else.

"I know," he affirmed, replying a little snarkier than he had intended to. "I think what I meant to say is I am going as George's plus one, I don't want to look like some scoundrel that he pulled off the street. I'm his guard after all, shouldn't I present myself like I'm part of the royal guard? Tommy and Tubbo hold themselves to high standards, always wearing nice clothes and making sure they're presentable."

Techno's gaze doesn't waver as he nods. "Okay, I see where you're coming from," he'd assured him, "but I still think your main priority should be keeping *yourself* safe. Harboring feelings for a prince can get messy."

Dream can feel the way his face drops after the comment, his shoulders raising to his ears stiffly. *Harboring feelings for a prince could get messy?* What the hell did Techno mean by that?"

"Excuse me?" Dream can't help the way he flinches, backing up against the hallway wall

defensively. The second his shoulders hit the wall he imagines himself being engulfed by it, being swept away from whatever this conversation was becoming. "What is *that* supposed to mean?"

At last, Techno's face shifts, the corner of his lips curling upward slowly. "I'm not stupid, *Clay*, and I know you're not either." The guard takes a step closer to him, the tips of their boots brushing against one another. "The Dream I knew *never* cared about *any* royals before. *Prince George* shouldn't be an exception."

Dream swallows against the lump that was starting to form in his throat. For someone who claimed that he wasn't his friend, Techno could read him all too well.

This wasn't him coming to realize that he *did* have feelings for George, because he *didn't*. *He couldn't*. In this life, Dream couldn't expect to have feelings for someone like *that*, not with the circumstances he was dealt.

Nevertheless, he *did* have a soft spot for George. It was just a slither of admiration, something he knew he could never water and allow to flourish. It was a hint of curiosity, wondering what type of reactions he could pull from the prince. It was the fact that no matter how hard he tried to tell himself the parallels weren't there, *they were*. George and he were so alike and yet so different at the same time, as if they were two sides of the same blade.

It was like they were just meant to be.

"He's not an exception," he found himself lying, despite it all. "I just... I *have* to hold myself to higher expectations if I'm a royal guard, right? If I don't want my cover to be blown."

Techno just clicks his tongue, a full-on smile breaking out onto his face as he turns his head, looking down the hallway with half-pointed interest. "Whatever you have to tell yourself to sleep at night." He *finally* took a step back, wrapping his arms across his chest.

"Lucky for you, it's been years. You're not the same scrawny looking boy that showed up at my doorstep all those years ago," Techno subtly speaks, eyes dropping to the floor. "You look a lot different. I doubt anyone would be able to recognize you easily, especially with *that* hair and all the damn scars you have."

Dream just stares at him, his mouth dropped open like a fish.

"No one out this far should be able to recognize you easily anyway. The description that was given after your disappearance was very vague. There are a lot of blond, green-eyed, freckled boys out there, I'm sure." Techno clears his throat, turning his back to him. "You're not the same teenager who practically crawled into these gates dying. I trust that you will make the right decisions to keep yourself safe."

Just like that, Dream finds himself walking back into his bedroom, none of his worries quelled. Techno was never good at comforting him. He wasn't expecting to feel any better after their conversation anyway, it was just nice to have *one* person who knew his *real* story to talk to.

"Dream."

This time, Skeppy is the one who greets him into their shared bedroom. Sapnap's eyes follow him carefully, a perfectly stilled expression played on his face. "I see why you like George," said Sapnap, no particular emotion lacing his voice.

Dream stops in his tracks, his eyes flickering from Skeppy to Sapnap who were both sitting on the edge of Sapnap's cot hunched over. A nervous laugh escapes him. "What does that mean, Sapnap?"

He feels like he's cornered, and he doesn't know why.

Sapnap glances over to Skeppy before standing. "I don't know what has happened between the two of you, but I can tell that George actually cares about you."

His words hang heavy in the air, each one threatening to suffocate Dream.

"I know you said he was everything we warned you he'd be, but I just didn't see that today. At all. I know an hour-long conversation shouldn't change my perspective on him, but I shouldn't have formed one without even meeting him in the first place."

It feels like a standoff in Dream's head. He should say something, shouldn't he? No words come out of his mouth though as confusion hits him like a bullet to the head.

"What?"

"George seems like a nice guy," Sapnap raises his voice slightly, rolling his eyes. "He's funny. He's not some stiff royal. He seems like he really does care about you, and that's nice."

"I don't know what you're getting at here," Dream finds himself saying, unsure of what else he's supposed to say.

"I don't know, either," Sapnap confesses, sounding almost defeated. "I just feel like we all let this whole situation with George come between our friendships. We miss you, Dream."

"I think we're starting to understand that you know... You hold George close to you now, too."

"And that's okay!" Sapnap hurriedly tacks on. "I think maybe George is good for you."

Something snaps in Dream, like a dam breaking. Something in the atmosphere has him feeling the need to finally spill everything that was starting to stack upon his shoulders. So, he tells his two best friends about his newly developing friendship with the prince. He tells them about the shared nights on the balcony. He tells them about the night in the woods where his mask was broken.

Neither of them scold him. They actually don't even look surprised.

"I called it from the start," Sapnap says somewhere in between their conversation. "George is trying to romanticize you!"

Dream can't help but laugh.

"Oh, he wishes," Skeppy comments, "you should have been there when they ate breakfast together every morning."

For a moment, things don't seem so scary anymore. Things felt *right* for once. He's there, with his friends, joking with them instead of feeling on edge for once, and it was like the world finally stopped spinning.

He's running. He's running with every single ounce of energy he has down the gravel path. His lungs are burning in protest with every stride, but he had the lead and there was no way he would give that up now.

"I'm not far behind you, Dream!" A familiar snarky boy comments from behind him. He doesn't bother to turn his head, already knowing that it was Sapnap on his heels.

"You're still behind me, and it's staying that way!" He practically barks out, already pumping his legs faster.

"You guys are so fun to train with!" Skeppy yells from a few yards behind him, which only makes him laugh.

"Oh my God, I know right? Maybe it'd be more fun if you kept up!" Sapnap yells from just behind him. He could practically feel the other breathing down his neck by now.

"Keep up, Sapnap! I'm about to leave you in the fucking dust!"

Yards in front of him, Dream could make out Wilbur and Techno's figures. They were waiting at the end of the trail for the three of them, looking a little horrified if Dream had anything to comment about it.

His eyes are too focused on the finish line to notice the two unfamiliar figures approaching.

"You're about to eat shit, Dream!" Sapnap practically yells into his ear as he feels a hand grab at his shoulder. His steps falter and he finds himself grabbing onto Sapnap's arm and pulling him up to his side as he evens the two of them out.

"What the hell!" Dream growls, digging his fingernails into Sapnap's shoulder. "Are you trying to get us killed?"

"I don't know, maybe!"

They continue running for a moment, their arms interlocked. Peeking out from the side of his mask, Dream unravels his arm from Sapnap's, pulling it back with enough force that it has Sapnap faltering over his own feet, tumbling forward.

They're two steps away from the finish line when both he and Sapnap fall onto a heap to the ground, their limbs tangling again. Dream groans when the back of his head hits the gravel path, the rest of his body half-hazardly falling over Sapnap's.

"What the hell was that?" Wilbur's voice booms over the two of them as running footsteps come closer.

The second Dream finds himself opening his eyes, he realizes his mask is half off his face, Wilbur swaying in his vision, Techno at his side. Suddenly, Techno is inches away from his face, pulling his mask over his face properly.

"Are we interrupting something?" An unfamiliar voice speaks from above him, but he doesn't bother to look. With another groan, his head drops to the gravel as Sapnap slaps his shoulder.

"Your highness?"

Wilbur sways out of his vision, only to be replaced with a sweaty and red Skeppy. He acknowledges that Wilbur is talking to someone in the back of his head, but he's too busy focusing on the shit-eating grin that Skeppy was sporting.

"I win, I think," he laughs loudly, extending a hand to Dream. Rolling his eyes, Dream accepts his hand, allowing Skeppy to pull him to his feet. Sapnap groans, pulling himself up from where he'd landed.

"That is not fair," Dream bites out, turning to Sapnap. "Sap cheated!"

"All is fair in love and war!" Sapnap spat back, whipping the gravel from his training clothes. "Besides, that fall was all your fault."

"It was my fault?" Dream gasped, raising his voice. "You were the one who grabbed onto me first! What were you expecting?"

Sapnap just shrugs, running a hand through his disheveled hair. "I don't know, I was hoping you'd slow down for one, not run even faster."

"Oh, you little—"

Wilbur clears his throat, grabbing their attention. "Dream," he scolded from behind Sapnap.

His eyes flickered over to the head guard as he acknowledged the two unfamiliar faces standing beside him. They were both dressed nicely, but that was all Dream had picked up on before his eyes were back on Sapnap, fire burning in his veins.

"Sorry," he grumbles, taking a step closer to Sapnap. "I'm calling for a rematch though, that was so unfair."

"Count me out," Skeppy snapped, slapping the back of Dream's back roughly. "You two can go at it, I'm done."

Dream doesn't acknowledge Skeppy, his attention solely set on Sapnap.

"Okay, bet," Sapnap heaved out, wiping the dripping beads of sweat from his forehead. "Back down the trail and back up?"

Dream nods, turning his body back down the path. The two are taking off again so fast that Dream barely catches the two unfamiliar figures watching him with careful eyes.

Dream finds himself marching up the castle steps with a purpose, feeling both energetic and free. Something about his conversations the previous night finally made things feel right in his head. Perhaps they weren't supposed to just make things *click* in his head, but they did; and for the first time in a while he felt like he was on the right path, doing the right things.

By the time he made it to George's bedroom door, he could already tell the prince was awake. Through the distorted glass, he could see George moving around his room, a single lit candle hanging from his hand.

He can't help but smile as he brings his fist to the door, knocking lightly.

George paused mid-step, his head snapping toward the door. "Coming!" He'd shouted, disappearing from the door frame only to return a moment later, his candle gone. The door opened slowly as George peaked out of his door cautiously.

"Oh, Dream!" He deflated, a warm smile blossoming as he opened his door fully, greeting his guard happily. "Good morning."

The smile on his face only grows. "Good morning, *princess*," he returns giddily, stepping through the doorway. "I came bearing a question."

"A question?" George closed his bedroom door, leaning against the frame with folded arms as he looked up to Dream. "What's poking through your mind this early?"

"Okay, well first of all, are there any plans for today?" He questions first, his eyes flickering from George's eyes to the doorframe nervously.

The idea he had in mind today wasn't *smart*. It was the furthest thing from that, actually. He'd still yet to figure out if the idea came from a selfish part of him or not.

George looked confused, but he grinned nevertheless. "No, thankfully. We're done setting up for the party now, it's all in the hands of the caterers and advisors," he answered, tipping his head the slightest. "Why, did you have something you wanted to do?"

"I was going to ask you if you knew anything about hand-to-hand combat."

He doesn't miss the way George kicks off the door, shaking his head as his arms swing at his side. He doesn't miss the small roll of his eyes or the huff of exasperation that leaves him.

"I told you, I have never had an actual sparring partner before," George says, "I did watch the guards train quite often, though. Wasn't much, just walked by them and whatever. So I guess my answer would be no."

Dream raises a challenging eyebrow. "Would you like to spar with me, then?"

George's gaze lands on him lazily, his lips parting. "What, do you get the kicks out of beating people who have less experience than you?"

"That's *not* it," he reassures the prince, licking his lips.

He'd been mulling over the thought of taking him out again. George had proven pretty well that he could hold himself, and if Sapnap and Skeppy's thoughts had any input on the situation, he seemed to care about Dream. He'd made it clear the guilt he held for trying to manipulate Dream, and he personally could sympathize with that.

He felt like he could trust George. He'd shown him his face, after all. The prince was also pretty *defensive* when Ranboo was trying to convince him to attend the party without his mask.

So, yeah. He trusted the prince. Maybe it was more than just 'trusting' him, but that thought would be buried with Dream in his grave.

"If you can beat me in one session, I'll take you outside of the walls."

The smile the prince had been sporting dropped in a second flat as his shoulders hiked up to his ears. "You know you don't have to do that, right?" He hurriedly spoke, raising a hand to him. "You don't owe me anything, if that's what you're thinking. You don't have to like... repay me, for keeping your face a secret..."

Confusion slapped Dream across the face.

"I thought you *wanted* to go outside of the walls?" Dream pointed out, a sharp breath leaving him. "Wasn't that the whole point of us sparring the other night? So you could convince me to take you out?"

They both fall silent, and Dream doesn't understand *why*. This was what George wanted the whole time, wasn't it? The whole reason he'd made Dream his guard, the whole reason he'd befriended him. Why was he all of a sudden trying to tell him he didn't have to?

He vividly remembers their first conversation in the forest where George had begged him to let him

feel free one more time, where he'd promised to stop running around if he agreed to take into consideration letting him outside of the walls.

Something wasn't adding up.

"I wasn't seeing this as a way to repay you," he said honestly, "I considered it like we talked about a few days ago."

George doesn't reply as his eyes drop to the floor. He wrings his hands, pulling his bottom lip in under his teeth. Dream would have found it attractive if the circumstances were different.

"You proved I could trust you. You proved that you could hold your own with a sword. Why wouldn't I have considered it?"

"I thought you were lying about taking it into consideration," the prince mumbled under his breath. "Which I was fine with, honestly."

Dream just stares at the prince, still confused. "I wasn't lying, I *did* take it into consideration. I really don't see this as payment. If I did, would it matter that much? This is... This is what you wanted, right?"

George's eyes land back on him, half-lidded. "It would matter. I wouldn't want you to see this as an incentive to keep me quiet. We're *friends*, right? I would keep quiet about whatever you shared with me regardless of whatever 'payment' you try giving me."

"Oh." He sounds shocked, and he *is*. He wasn't expecting *that* to come out of George's mouth. Part of him is glad George sees the two of them as friends. He'd like to consider them friends, after all.

Another part of him just confused, and he's not entirely sure why.

"I *don't* see this as payment," Dream reassures him once again. "We are friends. I trust you, George. I told you I was being serious about considering taking you outside of the walls."

George just shakes his head. "Right... Right, of course," he grumbles, running a hand through his hair jaggedly. "I don't know what I was thinking, sorry."

"Nothing to apologize for," Dream says, taking a step closer to the prince. "I get why you would have taken it that way."

The prince visibly deflates, lifting his head a little higher. "So, hand-to-hand combat?" A grim smile pulls across his face, Dream knows it's fake, but he doesn't push.

"It's a bit harder than handling a sword," Dream starts, finally feeling the tension that had been rising in his shoulders dissipate. "It requires a lot of skill and brainpower, especially if your opponent is bigger than you."

"So you want to spar, right now?"

"Why not?"

George's eyes crinkle just the slightest. "Okay. I'll take you," he laughs, his hands reaching for the buttons of his cloak. "I just have to win one session and you'll take me outside of the walls?"

"Just one," Dream repeats, nodding.

"Okay, you're on."

It had worked, finally. After begging and begging and begging his new guard, he'd finally convinced him to take him on a walk around the castle's grounds. It was the middle of June, the heat practically scorching down on them as they walked the gravel path.

"Are you okay, your highness?" His guard paused at his side. "It's not too hot for you, right?"

"George," he easily corrects the guard. "Just George. I don't understand why I must remind you every single day."

The guard tips his head toward him, narrowing his eyes. "I refuse to be caught lacking, your highness. Do you know what happens to those who lack?"

George backs up, just half a step, as he examines his guard's face wearily. He could never read him. He was stone cold, most of the time, keeping a practically still expression and ignoring half the words spoken to him.

"Lacking?" He parrots, not really understanding the context of the word he used.

"Those who lack get into trouble, your highness," his guard informs him easily, straightening his posture. George feels his eyebrows wrinkle in confusion. "Crossing the boundaries between the formal relation a guard and a prince should have is risky."

He can't help but laugh. "Dear lord, Quackity, how is referring to me as my name crossing a boundary?"

Quackity's gaze hardens on him. "The lacking starts there."

"I don't get what you're trying to say," George hums before taking another step down the trail. "Care to explain?"

Quackity follows after him down the path, keeping his distance. "Don't you keep up with the news regarding other kingdoms, sir?"

George rolls his eyes. "Get to the chase, please."

Quackity clears his throat. "Sir, are you telling me you don't know what happened in Gwent a few years ago?"

"I tend to only keep up with the information regarding our allies, not kingdoms like that," George said, malice lacing his voice. "I've heard one too many bad rumors stem from that kingdom, I just pretend it doesn't exist at this point."

"That's not a good way to live life, your highness."

"Your point?" George stops again, eyes landing on his guard, who's eyes follow him wearily as if he were a timid animal.

"Nevermind. Sorry, your highness." Quackity turned his head, attention drawn to the path before them. "What I was trying to say is some tend to take advantage if formalities are crossed. The Gwent's Prince was a prime example of that."

George just scoffed, eyes turning to the end of the path where two people he didn't quite recognize stood.

"You shouldn't listen to rumors from that kingdom. God only knows what's true and what isn't."

Quackity silences at his side as they continue down the path toward the figures. George recognized both as guards, if their uniforms gave anything away.

"I'm not far behind you, Dream!"

Startled by the sudden outburst, George turns his head, looking beyond the horizon of another converging path. He hears them before he sees them, their footsteps sounding like cattle running. Two guards suddenly bound over the crest of the horizon, shoving at one another's shoulders.

"You're still behind me, and it's staying that way!"

Quackity groans at his side. "God, it's the gate guards," he whines, "they're so loud and rowdy. Their training is intense, last I checked."

"Definitely looks that way," George comments, his eyes following the two guards carefully as they continue making their way down the path.

He can't keep his eyes off the two guards, watching carefully as they push and pull at one another, yelling words he can't quite make out. One of them is wearing a mask, a weird one too at that. Nevertheless, he can still see the man's flushed cheeks, sweat dripping down the side of them. Despite the sweat shining on their faces and the serious expressions they were wearing, he can't but think it looks like they're having fun.

Before he knows it, Quackity and he have made it to the sides of the other guards who were waiting for those that were running. They wait at their sides, watching the two guards in the lead as they're just yards away from them.

Before George can even fathom what is happening, the two of them are falling in a heap on top of one another. George gasps, a hand slapping over his mouth. A wave of mixed emotions splashes over him like a cool wave. At first, he feels sorry. That fall looked like it hurt, but at the same time, he was so close to laughing. What the hell did he just witness?

"What the hell was that?" One of the other guards booms, taking a step closer to the two guards who have fallen.

A hand claps over his shoulder gently, guiding him over to the guard who was standing over the two fallen guards.

"Are we interrupting something?" Quackity speaks from his side. Glancing over his shoulder, he looks up to Quackity, whose eyes are trained on something on the ground carefully.

"Your highness?" The same guard looks up to them with wide eyes, taking a step closer to them. "What an honor it is to be in your presence, sir. What brings you two here today?"

George looks up to the guard, who towers over him. "We were just going for a walk," he replies when Quackity doesn't. "Are you guys training?"

The guard grimaces. "We were. You see, these guards in particular are very competitive... I promise we are more put together than this."

"I am sure, no worries," George laughs easily, his eyes flickering back to the two guards who were finally standing now, shouting at one another.

"It was my fault? You were the one who grabbed onto me first! What were you expecting?"

"I don't know, I was hoping you'd slow down for one, not run even faster."

The two guards step up on one another and for a moment, George swears they're about to start swinging at each other.

"Oh, you little—"

The guard beside him clears his throat. "Dream," he'd scolded. The man with the mask stiffened, mumbling a quick apology under his breath, not even bothering to spare a glance their way.

The rest of their conversation isn't picked up by George, who is too distracted by the fact one of them was named Dream. Who named their kid Dream? That was his name, right? What kind of name was that?

He's painfully reminded his guard's name was literally Quackity just a moment after when he finally spoke again.

"Are those two new recruits?" Quackity questions.

"No, not really," someone replies, but George isn't paying attention. He's carefully watching the guards speak, readying up for another chase. "Dream's been here for at least four years and Sapnap grew up in the system because of his parents. They just... always act that way. I am so sorry, your highness, that you had to witness that."

"It's not an issue at all," he brushes off, turning his attention to the guard in front of him. "They look like they're having fun. We all need some fun in our lives."

"I love the way you look at things."

George doesn't reply, instead, his eyes trailing back down the path, watching as the two guards disappeared from his sight.

He couldn't help but smile.

Hidden Under The Surface

Chapter Summary

"That sounds wonderful," George hesitated, pulling back his hand. "Dream?" Looking down at the prince, he realizes George has turned away from him, his eyes settled on the balcony.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing, nothing is wrong," George reassures him, "I just— can I give you a hug?"

Dream can't shake the uneasy feeling that settles like a pit in his stomach as he watches George throw his cloak off and onto his bed in one swift motion. With slow hands he goes to untie the strings of his own cloak, catching George's eyes with his in the process. "Are you sure you want to spar?" He asks timidly, still caught up in the confusion that the prince had thrown him into.

George nods as he undoes the buttons of his sleeves, pushing them up to his forearms. "Yes, I am sure. As long as you promise that if I win a match, and you do end up taking me outside of the walls, you will not see it as payment."

He refrains from rolling his eyes as his lips lifted upward. "I promise I won't see it as payment," he parrots back, slipping his cloak off and dropping it onto the edge of the prince's bed.

Seemingly satisfied with his reply, George makes it to the middle of his room and stretches his arms over his head. As he moves to follow after him, George raises a hand to him, his eyes half-lidded as they trail his body in a very unstubtle way. "You may want to remove your armor," he clicks his tongue, turning his head from him, "unless you want me to hurt my hands."

This time Dream does roll his eyes as he backs up, leaning on the edge of George's bed. "Expecting to land a good punch, are we?" He teases as he brings his hands to the back of his shoulder blades, unclipping the fastens that kept his armor together.

"No," George answers truthfully, still looking away from him. "Just want to keep the playing grounds even, that's all."

"Uh-huh, *sure*."

It doesn't take him long to detach his chest plate and shoulder pieces. His arm pieces slip off with ease, as do his shin pieces. He leaves the golden plated armor on the floor in a heap as he straightens up, stretching his arms over his head. Finally, George turns his attention back to him, his eyes wavering over his abdomen region before flicking up to his masked face.

"Ready now?"

Instead of answering, he drops his arms behind his head, his fingers tracing the strap of his mask. George had already known what his face looked like at this point, what was the purpose of keeping the mask on around him anymore? George seemed adamant about helping him keep his identity a secret. He could trust him with his face. He doubted he'd be able to match up his face with the very vague description of the 'runaway Gwent Prince' anyway. Not that he saw George as an idiot or

anything, seeing as he was very much the opposite of that, he just knew that what Techno had said the other night was very sickeningly true. There were many blond-haired freckled boys out there, and he did look quite different from when he'd last been *home*.

Besides, doing hand-to-hand combat with a mask wasn't easy, *he would know*.

The last time he had taken part in a hand-to-hand sparring match, it had been with Sapnap as a training exercise. To put it lightly, Sapnap had kicked the shit out of him. It was hard to fight when you had no peripheral vision to use. Sword fighting came easier with a mask. At least even with a mask, it wasn't hard to miss a swinging blade. Light always found a way to glisten off it, catching his attention better than a fist could.

With a held breath, he slipped the strap over his head, pulling the mask off in one easy motion. He abruptly turned his head, avoiding George's reaction as he tossed the mask onto the prince's bed with his cloak.

"Yeah, I'm ready now," he announces, turning around to face the prince.

Standing before him, basking in the morning light that flooded in from the balcony doors, George looked ethereal, like a perfectly painted mirage. His breath caught in his throat in awe as he took in the prince before him who seemed to be frozen in time, his wide eyes stationed on him carefully.

It was moments like these where he realized just how much his mask affected his vision. Without the jagged edges of the cutout eye-holes getting in his way, he was able to openly admire George's appearance.

This was no place to admire him, though.

Clearing his throat, he takes a step toward the prince. "I'll go easy on you. Can't have you all bruised up before your birthday."

Whatever trance George had been stuck in finally breaks as his shoulders sag and he takes a step back, an eyebrow quirking up in interest. "What, are you imagining me with bruises or something?"

"No, I'm not," he corrects sternly, heat rising to his cheeks. What kind of question even was that? Who would purposely think about leaving bruises on someone? "Just— Don't make this weird."

"I shouldn't make this weird?" A hardy chuckle leaves the prince, his chest and shoulders shaking with every breath. "You're such an idiot, Dream." Fondness oozes in his tone and it's incredibly hard for Dream to miss it, to pretend that it isn't there. "I'm going to be honest with you, I have no clue what I am doing. I don't give you permission to make fun of me."

"*Oh*, I would *never* make fun of you, George," he sarcastically insists, enjoying the way George's smile widens. "Do you want some pointers before we start then? I'll give you some leverage."

The prince lifts his chin in interest. "What a gentleman. Some pointers would be nice, actually."

Dream hums, going over the mental list of pointers and strategies he'd remembered learning in training under Wilbur's care. "When you're attacking an opponent, you want to go for vulnerable spots like the stomach, diaphragm, and neck. They're the easiest spots someone could leave open. With *that* being said, you want to try and focus on covering those spots on yourself."

Hand-to-hand combat was like muscle memory to Dream at this point. With little to no thought, he found himself crouched down, dipping his head the slightest as he brought both of his arms up, one slanted over his face and neck while the other hovered close to his chest.

"Keeping a neutral stance like this while you weigh out your opponent's next move is the best way to go, that way you have a way to protect yourself."

George nods, mimicking his stance with little effort like a child. Dream can't help but laugh as he corrects his stance.

"Hand-to-hand fights don't last long, they're *very* tiring. What you want to focus on is defending yourself and finding the best solution to remove yourself from the fight. If you can't find a solution, you want to try to find a way to immobilize your opponent. A punch to the jaw, messing up their balance, anything that would take them back will help you."

You have to act quickly when you're stuck hand-to-hand with someone. One wrong move and you're dead, especially if they're concealing a knife. Lucky for you, I have no knife that's waiting to cut you up on my person and I'm just testing to see if you can actually fend off an opponent long enough to not get yourself killed."

A breathy laugh escapes the prince. "Are you sure about that?"

"What, want to pat me down and check for yourself?" He can't help the way he raises a suggestive eyebrow, realizing fairly quickly that his face is on display for George to see.

"I'm good," he insists, dipping his head to the side, "anyway, that's all?"

"All I can think of off the top of my head—other than footwork. Footwork is important. You don't want to be tripping over your feet mid-battle. You also don't want to be planting them in just one spot. You want to stay on your tippy-toes so you can move with ease."

With another nod, George is dropping into the stance he'd shown him. "Sounds easy enough. You're going soft on me, right?"

"Right," he affirms, mimicking George's stance, "can't say that anyone else would ever go easy on you if you know, we were to leave the kingdom walls and we were to be attacked."

"I know that," George jeers offendedly.

"I'm just letting you know." He raises open palms toward the prince as an act of surrender. "Give me your worst, seriously. I'll be able to take it."

Curling his hands back into fists, he dipped his head down, ready for a fight.

He couldn't help but find it humorous that the two of them, a prince of a kingdom and his knighted guard, were about to *fight*—in the prince's bedroom, of all places. If anyone had stepped in at this moment he for sure would be losing his job. God, if he even *slightly* messed up and wounded the prince, he'd lose his job.

What the fuck was he doing here? All he was doing was orchestrating something that *shouldn't* have ever been thought of. He was stirring the pot to George's fantasies of escaping his kingdom.

He should have shut this down long ago, should have told George firmly that he would never take him outside the safety of the castle—but it was too far to turn around now. He'd already taken the prince out once, would one more time kill?

Maybe he was being selfish. Maybe he liked the idea of escaping too, even if it was for a little bit.

Maybe he liked the idea of escaping with George, escaping to a place where he could ditch the lies and the masks and fake personas.

This was dangerous waters he was treading in, and God, he was about to *drown* if he didn't stop whatever *this* was becoming soon.

Before he can delve further into his caving thoughts, George is moving in front of him, fists raised. His expression has fallen into something serious, his eyebrows drawn down, his jaw clenched like he was ready to put up a fight.

He liked the fire that was burning in his expression.

He's not given any more time to admire the prince before him. Without a warning, he was lunging forward, breaking the gap between the two of them. He reacts fast enough, bringing his forearm up to intercept the incoming fist his way, their wrists clashing messily.

George steps back, looking a bit surprised. He's refusing to look Dream in the eye, his gaze set solely on his body.

Typically in battle, Dream focused on his opponent's head. Wherever their head was, their body would follow, but he supposed that was beside the point.

Again, George is moving forward on him, a poorly formed fist coming for his right shoulder. This time, Dream is able to catch his fist in his hand. He wraps his fingers harshly around the prince's small hand, pushing him back with enough force to cause him to lose his balance.

This time, Dream advances on him, preparing to land a punch to his diaphragm. George's eyes are quick though and he's quick to block his chest, pushing away Dream's hand sloppily, but it was good enough.

"Impressive," Dream comments through labored breaths.

George rolls his eyes, adjusting his sleeves so they settle better on his upper arms. "Wasn't that impressive. C'mon, give me a little more to work with here."

Dream listens and he obliges.

He advances on the brunette once again, readying his fists. His punches are coordinated, but he barely puts any strength behind them as he aims for the prince's chest. George easily intercepts each punch, pushing him back just a step.

Suddenly, they're circling each other with playful grins. Dream enjoys the way the adrenaline rush that fills him feels as he shifts his weight experimentally on his feet, preparing for another advance.

The prince doesn't expect him to leap forward, charging at him. Unprepared, George recoiled as Dream's fist met George's hip with force. The prince jumps back, hissing slightly.

"Okay, *ouch*," he grumbles, dropping his hands as he rubbed his side. "I yield, give me a moment."

"I didn't even hit you that hard," Dream muses, stepping back. He wipes the sweat that was starting to form from his forehead with the back of his gloved hand, eyes trained on the prince.

"I don't know if you noticed but I don't have a lot of padding there, idiot." George laughs under his breath and Dream can't help the way his stomach lurches at the sound of it. When he's finally recovered, the prince shakes his wrists out, bringing his fists up. "Again?"

They continue like this for a few rounds. Dream wins, again and again, managing to land a couple of light punches to George's ribs and diaphragm, each time George yielding so he can reassess what he is doing wrong. He doesn't hurt George again, thankfully.

"Do I just suck at this?" The prince whines, dropping his hands to his sides.

"No, you're just inexperienced," Dream reassures him, stepping up to his friend. With a bruised hand, he grabs his shoulder, shaking it slightly. "You're doing good for someone who's never fought before."

Shrugging out of his grasp, George turns his back to him as he throws his hands to the ceiling exasperated. "What am I doing wrong? I'm doing something wrong, right?"

Dream hums. He'd been watching George *carefully* since they'd been fighting. He wasn't necessarily doing anything wrong. He mimicked Dream's moves perfectly, just never putting enough force behind them. He also had failed to use his legs to his advantage.

At one point, Dream had managed to get close enough to hook the tip of his shoe behind the prince's shin, knocking him off balance. He'd grabbed onto George's hand just in time to save him from falling face forward into the carpet.

"Use your legs more," is all Dream offers him.

"Helpful, so helpful."

"Want to try again, or do you want to pick this up another time?"

The prince considers his offer, taking in shallow and rapid breaths. Sweat was dripping down his temples slowly and Dream was doing all he could to prevent himself from moving forward and wiping it off himself.

"No, let's keep going. Last one," George settles, finally wiping his forehead.

This time, Dream eases up on him, feeling a bit sorry he's put a *prince* through such exertion. He could tell that George was slowly becoming tired despite the fact he still put one-hundred percent of his efforts into their sparring match.

They are practically toe-to-toe this match.

This time, George takes no hesitation to keep advancing on him, throwing punches at him. He manages to get him a few times, a punch landing on his shoulder and a second on his collar bone. He's pleasantly surprised by the force George puts behind them as he stumbles back just a bit.

"Okay, that's better—"

He doesn't expect George to throw all the strength he has into his next punch. He doesn't react in time, doesn't lift his arm fast enough to block the punch aimed for his ribs. The second it lands, it burns. It's not enough to make him reel back in pain, but it definitely gives him motivation.

If George could dish it, he could take it.

With a bit more confidence this time, Dream is reaching out, grabbing George by the forearm and pulling him forward with a tug. When the prince gives an exasperated sigh and winds up a punch with his right arm too, Dream is catching his other hand, holding both of his wrists in front of them with force.

The amount of force he's using is bruising. He watches as George's face wrinkles in confusion for a moment before he looks up to Dream with wide eyes, pupils dilated.

"Going to yield?"

George licks his lips, his eyes flicking back down to their hands. He's expecting him to yield. He's expecting him to give up. He's expecting them to be done sparing for the day and for George to admit maybe he's not ready to go outside of the walls, but none of that happens.

It's just a whole 'sword sparring' session once again.

With a literal *growl*, George was using his entire body weight to twist his arms in Dream's grasp. Dream stumbles, caught off guard by the sudden movement, he barely notices the leg George has stuck out to trip him.

In one fast, messy, and heated motion, Dream is falling onto the edge of the prince's bed, and he's taking George down with him.

In the last few moments of clarity that Dream relishes in before the storm of reality hits, he finds himself analyzing the carefully (and not so carefully) treaded steps of the budding friendship he and George had crafted, trying to figure out when '*this*' all started. He doesn't know when *it* started. He can't particularly recall a specific moment where it hit him that the way he thought about George wasn't 'right.'

There was no one moment where he could pinpoint and explain that *that* was the moment he'd known he'd fallen deep in over his head.

Dream, admittedly, *never* felt this way about someone. He never had the luxury to get himself swept away by someone. Truthfully, *now* wasn't the time to get swept away by someone either, but there was something about George that just had him coming back to this same desperate and confused point.

He wishes he knew when *it* started—these confusing feelings that clouded his better judgment.

Maybe it started when they first met. Perhaps it was when he stepped into the glass room where George had waited for him, basking in the morning light like some divine angel sent from heaven to come and retrieve him. He knew from the moment they met how *attractive* he was. It was hard to shake such a memorable first impression. Time and time again he'd catch himself admiring the prince—*understanding* just how fine of a person he was. *There was no flaw in admiring one's beauty, right?*

Or maybe it started when George frequently insisted they dine together for breakfast. It was such a simple gesture, but a gesture that had Dream's head whirling nevertheless. He'd claimed that George was a sweet person from that very moment (ignoring the whole manipulation thing, of course.) The prince had proven time and time again that he was, at the core, a kind person. *God*, who sat on their balcony with their guard in the middle of the night to just *talk*? What type of prince would just leisurely suggest reading his *guard* a *story*.

Maybe it started when he realized how alike the two of them were. They seemed to be two sides of a story, meant to finish one another. They craved the same things out of life—came from similar backgrounds—and somehow came to meet one another on the same line in this lifetime. Was it some sort of coincidence? Was he always meant to meet George, to become his guard, to slip into these *dangerous feelings*?

Maybe it was in the way George subtly stepped into his personal space so much. Maybe it was the subtle shoulder bumps, or the way he had so delicately held his face in the palms of his hands, or the way their hands latched to one's like they were meant to be. It just felt right to him like George was supposed to be the one there, breaking every damn boundary he had.

George was breaking every boundary he had, actually.

He brought him to the forefront of his comfort zone's cliff, enticing him with kind friendship and careless whispers, and just kindly pushed him over the edge. There was no one like George that made him feel the way he did—so safe, so cared for, and yet so scared and confused at the same time.

George was something else, and he loved it.

He loved the way he smiled. He practically ached at every smile that was directed towards him. It was such a stupid thing to swoon over—*someone's smile*—but it brought him so much happiness. It was so refreshing to find beauty in such a cruel world.

He loved the way George's laughs sounded like the sweetest melodies to his ears. He loved the way he could wrap himself up in his words and feel *safe*.

Truthfully, it wasn't until that moment, as they crashed together in a heap onto George's bed, that every single piece clicked together.

He never realized that the feeling of attraction and desire was so deep.

His clarity was gone in a blink of an eye as Dream's hips slammed into the corner of the mattress, George's hips meeting his with the same force immediately after. With a heated gasp, Dream's upper body fell onto the soft mattress, his legs slipping down between George's. A beat later George's head was dropping onto his chest as a small 'oof' escaped the brunette.

They laid in a heap on the corner of George's bed, Dream half on half off the bed, his hands cradling George's wrists as the other lays on top of him with a knee pressed between his legs. The position has him internally groaning as he throws his head back onto the bed, his eyes meeting George's.

Neither of them say anything. They don't move, they don't even *breathe*. Dream wants to throw himself off the nearest cliff at that exact moment.

He's expecting George to scramble off of him and collect himself. He's expecting him to just stand up and brush the situation off like it was nothing—because it didn't have to be anything. It didn't need to mean anything. It *really* didn't need to mean anything.

They were just sparring. It was just a simple mishap. It was just a little trip.

Despite everything he was telling himself, he couldn't even find it himself to push the brunette off him, his limbs feeling like they had been stuffed with lead.

With his lips parted, Dream loosens his grip on George's wrist, his fingers trailing down the prince's slender arms. It's a *sensational* feeling, the warmth of skin just under the pads of his fingertips. He wants to savor the touch, he wants to *drown in it*, but George pulls an arm away, pushing up closer to him. His breath hitches at the sudden friction that's dragged across his body.

He recoils, wishing for the sheets of George's bed to engulf him, but he knows they won't. Instead, George presses his forearm against Dream's throat. It's a subtle push, nothing more, but it's enough

of a force that it has Dream gasping for air. George's eyes haven't wavered from his face, and it's too much.

It's all too much.

"I won," he whispered just inches from his face, dragging his tongue across his bottom lip right after.

This time, Dream finally does move. He presses his palms against George's chest and pushes him, hoping to put some space between the two of them, but the brunette pushes against his touch.

Too close. Too God damn close.

"George," he whispers thickly, unsure where he's really about to go with that sentence. Instead of finishing it, he pushes against the brunette once again, only to be met with resistance once more. Above him, George pulls his arm back slightly, letting his arm linger against his collar bone. He's holding a needy expression, his eyes trailing over his face greedily. He hates the heat that rises to his cheeks as he watches the brunette openly admire him.

"Tell me you yield," George mumbles, his eyes stopping to meet his. "I want you to admit I won."

"You're an idiot," he mutters back, his voice shaking. "You won, now get up."

George doesn't get up.

A string of curses leaves his lips as he raises a hand to Dream's jaw. With concentration, he drags his index finger from his jaw to the junction behind his right ear. Dream just helplessly follows his hand's movements with his eyes, flinching when George's thumb makes contact with his cheekbone. His brain goes into haywire as the brunette traces his cheekbone gently, his fingers making their way to his cheek.

Dream's body is on fire, his brain a jumbled mess.

"You have a really deep scar here," George said softly, his fingers coming to rest against the side of his cheek. "What happened?"

Dream can't help the way he stiffens. Bringing his arm down to his side he pressed his elbow into the mattress, forcing the two of them to sit up slightly, bringing their faces closer. "I got shot with an arrow," he replies in a hushed tone as if they were in a crowded room and he only wanted George to hear him, "I was never able to treat it properly."

"Oh." With a comforting touch, the prince traced the scar, his dull fingernails scraping lightly against the raised skin. "It suits you."

Dream's giggle softened the room, cutting through the thick tension that had been budding between the two of them. "What? What is that supposed to mean?"

George shrugs, his fingers dipping back under his chin. "I don't know," he grumbles, his eyes locked on the scar. "I kind of expected you to have scars. They look good on you, *like*, in a badass type of way."

"You think *scars* look good on me?"

"What?" George's eyes flickered back up to his. His eyes were soft in the moment, half-lidded as he looked up to Dream like he was the only person in existence. "Was I not supposed to admit that?"

Dream doesn't like where this is going. He doesn't like the feeling that is urging him to pull the brunette in *closer*, doesn't like the way he suddenly feels needy for his touch. He doesn't like the way George is looking down on him, giving him a glimmer of hope that maybe the feeling of attraction was mutual.

These were dangerous roads to tread on.

He shouldn't entertain the thought of George actually *liking* him. He shouldn't even entertain the thought that he liked George.

At the end of the day, George was a *prince* and he was his *guard*. George didn't have the 'luxury' to dream of any sort of romance that wasn't already signed up for him, let alone one with his damn guard. He'd be destined for some pretty princess soon enough.

Dream was okay with that thought, he realized. Not totally on board with it, but *okay* with it.

He didn't have the capacity to care for someone like *that*. Not with the persona he had to live by. Not with the constant fear that wavered over his head like a swinging ax. Not with all the lies he had to constantly tell just to keep himself alive.

He wasn't cut out for loving someone, not in this lifetime.

He'd only ever end up hurting him, and George didn't deserve that.

George deserved to be loved to the fullest extent.

Willing himself to concentrate, he clears his throat, pushing his palms against George's chest once more. "Okay, you won. I yield. Get up," he speaks firmly, praying to whatever god that is listening that George will actually listen; and he does.

Reluctantly, George rolled off of him and laid beside him with a quiet huff. Dream couldn't help but mourn the loss of his body heat the second it's gone, his hands curling at his sides as George's shoulder settled beside his.

He hated *this*.

This feeling he couldn't act upon.

"That was a cheap win," he mutters, eyes locked on the royal blue canopy of George's bed. His eyes were stinking as he swallowed nervously, his throat feeling tight. He felt like crying. "I'm tempted to ask you for a rematch."

He's trying his hardest to put some sort of normalcy back into their conversation but he could tell that even George is tense now.

"I think it was a fair win," the brunette huffed back, his voice soft and distant. "Do you really want to go again?"

"No," he answers truthfully. He'd probably just disintegrate on the spot if they continued. He'd probably melt if George's hands were on him again.

George hummed. "That's what I thought."

The bed creaks between the two of them as George sits up, his head turning to Dream. With a hesitant gaze, Dream looked up out of the corner of his eyes, catching the prince's eyes *once*

again. He's looking down at him, his tousled hair sticking up in several places, making him look like he was sporting a nasty case of bed hair (Dream still found it attractive).

The prince's lips part slightly as he runs his tongue against his bottom lip. "It's days like these where you've got my head spinning."

"What?" Dream responds with, confused. He finds himself going to sit up too but a rough hand is sprawled against his shoulder, pushing him back against the bed with force. A startled gasp escapes him as his head slams against the mattress for the second time that day. George's hand lingers on his shoulder as he leans down, coming *way too close* for Dream's comfort.

"What?" He parrots back, rolling his eyes with a lazy smile. "What do you think I meant?"

Dream stares back at him as George retracts his arm. "I— I don't know," he stampers back in return. "Did I do something wrong?"

At that, George just *laughs*. He throws his head back, practically slipping off the edge of the mattress as he did. "No, you didn't," he answers through gasps, "I was just joking. I'm just surprised you've given me this many chances to prove to you that I can handle my own and that you should take me outside of the kingdom."

This time, Dream does sit up without George pushing him back down. He watches as George rubs his watering eyes, a toothy grin flashed his way.

"What do you even want to see outside of the kingdom?" He suddenly asks, his knee bumping against George's as they both readjust themselves onto the bed. "It's just a bunch of forest for a while and then some small villages not too far."

At the question, George tips his head, propping himself up on his right arm. "Good question," he hums, turning his eyes upward. "I just want the satisfaction of being able to say I have been outside of the kingdom."

"Oh, yeah?" Dream practically *purred*.

"Uh— yeah?" George's cheeks grow a rosy red and Dream can't help but savor the image. "I don't know— I would like to go and visit one of the villages, maybe? Perhaps we could grab drinks at a tavern."

Dream gawks at him for a moment.

"Are you asking me to take you to a damn bar?"

"It was an *idea*," George insists, playfully slapping his knee. The contact has Dream's eyes flying down to the prince's hand accusingly. "I haven't really ever thought about what I would do if I actually got out. I just want *out*, even if it's for a few hours. Visiting another village would be nice. Watching the sunrise... Meeting new people for the fuck of it. It all sounds nice to me."

"Living a different life for one night?"

George's hand settles on his knee. "Something like that, I guess," he agrees, "it'd be nice to just go out for one night and pretend to be someone else. Live on the edge a little."

Dream wants to cackle, but he doesn't. *Pretending to be someone you're not wasn't as fun as people made it out to be.*

"I guess you're right," he settles on saying instead. "Well, you won. I like staying true to my word, George. When do you want to go out?"

"Do I need to know now?" George asks his gaze soft on him. "I don't think I'm mentally prepared to think about it right now."

"No, you don't," Dream reassures him. "Whenever you're ready, just let me know when?"

"That sounds wonderful," George hesitated, pulling back his hand. "Dream?" Looking down at the prince, he realizes George has turned away from him, his eyes settled on the balcony.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing, nothing is wrong," George reassures him, "I just— can I give you a hug?"

The question breaks all the composure Dream was able to muster over the past few minutes. With burning cheeks, he simply cleared his throat. "That's fine," he replied in the most monotone tone he could muster, hoping it didn't sound too forced.

George seemed to have missed the awkward detail because in a moment flat, the prince was pulling him to his chest with needy hands. Bending down slightly to return the hug, his nose tickled against the prince's ear. He let out a tiny gasp and squirmed for a moment before he tightened his grip around his guard.

"Thank you, for everything, Dream. I appreciate you more than you know."

Drunk Words Are Sober Thoughts

Chapter Summary

"Wait, Dream!" Dream stops in his tracks, turning his head over his shoulder. He doesn't bear to meet eyes with the prince, instead, his eyes settling on the balcony doors. "Tomorrow night. Let's sneak out tomorrow night."

A quiet chuckle escapes his lips.

"No, George. Your party is two days away, you will be exhausted."

"I don't care," George stated, his voice rising a little.

Eventually, their moment is broken. Dream knew that it would come sooner or later and yet, he found himself surprised when George pulled away, sporting a lopsided smile. He was so tempted to follow after him and pull him closer once more—to spill every single dirty secret he'd pieced together just moments before, but he has some self-control and he refrains.

Instead, he clears the now forming lump in his throat. "It means a lot, that you think that way. I appreciate you too, and I—"

Everything stops when there's a small knock at the door. This time, the moment is entirely shattered. Both of their heads snap to the door as if they'd been caught doing something they shouldn't have been doing. Through the distorted glass, Dream can make out a tall figure standing there, holding something in his arms.

"Your highness?" A familiar voice calls out. "Are you there?"

Both of them are scrambling off the bed in a blink of an eye. George grabs his cloak, pulling it back on with haste as Dream follows his lead, dropping to the floor to pull his armor back.

"Yes, I am. Is everything okay, Ranboo?" George questions, his voice wavering as he adjusts his cloak, taking a confident step toward the door.

"Everything is fine, your highness!" Ranboo calls back. "Is Dream in there with you?"

There's a moment of silence as George turns his head over his shoulder. Thankfully, Dream is used to putting his armor on fast and he's almost done he pulls his arm pieces back on. With a labored breath, George grabs his mask and cloak off the bed and throws both of them at his chest.

"He's here. We were just talking," the prince explains, turning back to the door. "Are you here for something important?"

"Sort of!" The advisor calls back. "May I come in?"

As George makes it to the door, Dream ties his cloak back on sloppily. With a little more care, he pulls his hair back and he slips his mask back on. He gets to his feet just in time as George opens the door, allowing the royal advisor to come in.

"Good afternoon, your highness." Ranboo bowed. When he stood again, his eyes landed on Dream with a smile. "Good afternoon to you as well, Dream."

"Good afternoon," he replied a little stiffly.

"What has brought you here, Ranboo?" George opts to ask. It doesn't sound unkind, but he truly does sound confused. "I thought that there was nothing left to do today?"

"That is where you are wrong, your highness!" Ranboo pulls his clipboard up, clearing his throat. "The king and queen have set up a dinner party for tonight, to celebrate all the hard work that was put into your party. You, Dream, and Sapnap have all been invited. Some of the caterers, cooks and tailors will be there, as well as the other personal royal guards Tommy and Tubbo. I came to inform you both to get ready and dress in something nice."

Dream turns to his prince, a little taken back. A dinner party? Dinner parties were usually for the royal and high-class people that resided in the castle— some dinner parties happened when other kingdoms were visiting, too. Dream couldn't say he ever recalled a kingdom holding a *casual* dinner party with such 'low class' people.

"Ah, I see." George clicked his tongue, making his way to Ranboo's. He stood at his advisor's side, eyes trailing over the paper in front of him. "My parents will be attending?"

"Why would they not be, your highness?"

"No reason. I was just surprised. They haven't set up a dinner party so... casually before," George sighs, taking a step back from Ranboo.

"I suppose you are right there," he hums back in thought. "I think they are just a little more gracious this year, especially with all the hard work their staff has put in this year."

George's eyes land on Dream, but he can't make out the expression on his face.

"Thank you for informing us. We'll get ready as soon as possible. You can be dismissed now, Ranboo."

With another bow, the royal advisor is seeing himself out, George closing the bedroom door behind him. With another sigh, he turns back to Dream, looking a little worse for wear. His eyebrows are pinched together, his lips pressed together in a firm line.

It's a much different expression than the one he had when it was just the two of them.

"This is weird," he states, walking toward his wardrobe. "I can't say they've ever had a dinner party with the staff before."

"Do you think somethings up, then?" Dream finds himself asking, curious.

"Mmm, probably not. It's just weird. They haven't had parties like this for my other birthdays before."

Behind him, George digs through his wardrobe, grabbing a change of clothes from it. "You can go wait on the other side of the door. I'll only be a moment unless you want to stay and watch?"

Heat rises to Dream's cheeks in an instant, his heart clambering to his throat. There was no way the prince was actually being serious. "I—I am good, I will go wait outside—"

"I was joking, Dream," George says, shaking his head slightly. When he turns again, there's a small and hopefully smile on his face. "I'll be right out. I just want to get out of these sweaty clothes."

With a nod, Dream sees himself out too, shutting the door softly behind him. He ignores the way his heart has started racing as his fingertips leave the doorknob.

A lot had happened in just one day.

A lot he was unable to process.

When they make it to the guards' quarters, they spot Sapnap being escorted back by a well-dressed servant who was holding a cold expression at his side. The moment the guard notices the two, his eyes widen a little more as he waves them down. "Dream, George," Sapnap greets as they all make it to the front door. He seems a little frantic, his pupils blown and his hair tousled. "What's going on? They just pulled me off my post without any explanation."

At his side, Dream doesn't miss the way George glares at the servant behind them. "You may be dismissed. We'll be back at the castle soon." The servant bows before scurrying off down the path. With a breath of relief, George turns to Sapnap. "Sometimes I forget how bad these servants can be about putting things, my apologies. We're all being invited to a dinner party, in the castle," he explains. "We didn't know about this until half an hour ago."

A soft 'oh' escapes Sapnap. "Look, I am all for parties, but why was I invited?" He questions timidly. "Aren't dinner parties supposed to be for the *highly respected* people?"

"The party is to celebrate everything for my birthday celebration finally being finished. I am *guessing* you were invited since you will be taking Dream's spot as my personal guard for the party."

"That would make sense, I guess. Does this mean we get to *dress up*?" A mischievous smile plays on Sapnap's face and Dream can't help but groan, pushing himself past Sapnap to open the door to their *home*.

"No, it means we're wearing nothing but tarps."

"Oh, sick!" Sapnap jokes from behind him. "Does that mean I get to watch you str—"

"Don't—*Don't* finish that thought," Dream scolds him as they all file into the main room. Sapnap only chuckles from behind him, insisting he wasn't going to say anything bad, but Dream knew him. The three of them make it down the hallway in silence, receiving a few odd glares from the lingering guards. It wasn't anything new though, every time George paid a visit all eyes were on them carefully.

When Dream pushes open the door to their bedroom, he is greeted with yet another frantic looking guard. Skeppy sat up from his cot, his cloak having been discarded on the floor as well as his armor. His normal guard attire had been traded for a frilly looking white shirt, a leather tunic, and black slacks—a particularly fancy set of clothes that Dream had barely ever seen the other wear before.

"Hey," he greets, seemingly out of breath. "Were you guys taken off your post, too? Some servant came to fetch Bad and I about an hour ago. They told us to leave and get dressed in something nice."

Dream can't help the way he automatically turns to George, looking for some explanation. It made

sense for Sapnap to have been invited to the dinner, but Skeppy? He was just a guard who worked in the kitchen area, helping to move supplies and make sure there were no castaways in the loading carts. How would the king and queen have known about him?

"Oh?" George steps into the room from his side, Sapnap following after him. "You're Skeppy, right? The guard who helps in the kitchen with deliveries?" Skeppy simply nods as he runs a hand through his hair, a somewhat nervous habit he'd picked up on. "You work with Bad frequently, don't you? Did he not explain anything to you?"

"No, not really," Skeppy answers, "all he said when the servant told us to get ready was to meet him in the dining hall before the sunset."

"There's going to be a dinner party for the staff who helped set everything up for the party coming up. If you helped the cooks in the kitchen with all the food deliveries coming in, that is probably why you got invited," George explains, his tone delicate. "I heard you guys were under immense pressure to make sure everything came in. I bet there were a lot of carts to look over."

"Oh, you have no idea." With a sigh, Skeppy sat back down on the edge of his bed. "So we're all attending this... Party?"

"This is going to be fun," Sapnap comments as he makes it to his cot. "The last time we all attended a party together was the inaugural ceremony for the incoming guards, and Dream, oh my God, you were wasted—"

"Don't remember— didn't happen," Dream hissed through clenched teeth. "That definitely is not the reason I do not drink anymore."

At his side, George *giggles*. "Never thought of you as a drinker, Dream," he hums, almost suggestively, into his ear.

"Yeah, well, I don't drink anymore," he grumbled before pushing the prince more into the room, closing the bedroom door behind them. Taking the action as 'welcome' into the room, George happily made his way over to Dream's cot and sat on it as if it were his own, a pleasant (yet mischievous) grin pulling on his face.

"I can't even remember the last time we had to dress up." Already working at the fastens of his armor, Sapnap sighs. "We must have all been teenagers still."

"You say that as if being nineteen isn't still being a teenager," Dream comments as he makes his way over to where their dressers stand, his hands already working to remove his cloak.

"Whatever. Anyway, *Georgie*, who else will be attending this party, and what should we expect? I can't say I have ever attended such a fancy event before."

"*Georgie?*" George parrots. "That's the first time I've ever heard someone use that nickname."

"Oh, do you like it? I thought it was nice!"

Rolling his eyes, Dream turned his back to the trio as he undid his armor and put it back into its proper place. He made sure to put his cloak on the top of his dresser as well, allowing the broach that George had bought him to shine in front of him.

"I—I guess? Um, anyway. You really haven't been to a dinner party?"

"Not a royal one. I've attended some of the dinner parties down in the village with some friends but

they haven't been anything *spectacular*!"

"I doubt they're much different, honestly," George insists, "people just stand around and talk for a while, some awful band comes and plays, and then we eat, have a few drinks, and go off on our merry ways. They're pretty boring."

Dream can't help the slight huff that leaves him. Pretty boring was an understatement. Dinner parties *sucked*. He'd be lying if he said he was excited for tonight. He was just glad he'd just be attending as George's guard and nothing more.

Prince's always had to deal with formalities.

He decides to drown out the trio behind him as he finishes putting his armor away. He dug through his dresser, looking for a suitable outfit to wear that didn't have noticeable crease lines engraved into it. Eventually, he decided on a shirt that looked similar to Skeppy's (the color being a dark green, instead) accompanied with a sleeveless leather tunic that he is sure he stole from Techno at some point.

At some point, Sapnap makes it to his side, bumping their elbows as he invades his personal space.

"I hope you made up your mind and told Ranboo that you were going to wear your mask to George's party, by the way," he'd whispered into his ear as he opened his own dresser. "I know it's not my place to press, and I never would, but I know there's a reason you're so adamant about keeping your identity a secret and I doubt that you want to throw five years of being careful down the drain."

Dream can only gawk at his friend, watching as he carefully sorted through his clothes.

"You did tell him, right?"

"I— I didn't, actually," he replies earnestly, "I don't know. I think that maybe I don't need to be *as* careful anymore."

"Did something change your mind about it— keeping your identity a secret, that is?"

With a shrug, he leaned up against his dresser, his eyes flickering across the room to where George sat on the edge of his cot, waving his hands about as he spoke to Skeppy. He willed his heart to beat again when he felt it still for just a moment at the sight.

"I guess," he answers. "I just realized you know, it's been five years. I doubt I look like the same person I did when I left my previous *village*. I don't think I have anything to really be scared about anymore."

"Interesting view," Sapnap hummed, closing his dresser. "Well, if you think that you don't have anything to worry about, I trust you. Just know I'll always be here for you, if something were to happen, of course."

"That sounds very... ominous," Dream can't help but comment, turning his full attention to Sapnap who was openly looking up at him with a grin.

"You've always struck me as like a thief on the run or something. I'm just saying, if anyone were to ever come for your ass, I'd be your backup. You're my best friend." A grin spreads across his friend's face mischievously. "I'd fight on your behalf."

"Wow, so reassuring," he can't help but joke back, feeling the conversation may have gotten a bit

too deep. "Is this a promise?"

"Oh, it's a promise," Sapnap laughed. "God, man, I would kill for you if I had to."

"I'd do the same for you too," he ends up saying.

He feels like this conversation should just be a joke, that they were just two friends joking around like they normally would—but there's weight behind the words Sapnap speaks, whether he realizes it or not.

And it hates it.

"Are you two going to get ready? We don't have all the time in the world you know!" Skeppy shouts from behind them, dropping onto his cot with a huff.

"Oh, shut up! You just want to go and see Bad again. Give us a minute, God!" Sapnap shouts back, turning around to stick his tongue out at him.

From the corner of the room, George just laughs, shaking his head as he drops it into his hands.

They weren't even ready yet, and for some reason, Dream just knew it was going to be a long night.

No more than half an hour later, Dream finds himself leading the prince as well as his fellow guards back to the castle. It's strange, he thinks, how prim and proper they all look. Deep down inside, he truly missed wearing such fine and elegant clothes, but part of him found safety and sanctuary hiding under his guard armor. He felt like a simple person in his guard attire—like he was just a *regular* person with a *normal* job.

"This is going to be so weird," Skeppy comments halfway through their tread. "I can't say I have ever truly met the king or queen. Should I be worried?"

"I haven't either. I'm shaking, not going to lie," Sapnap adds on, grabbing out to reach for Skeppy as they walk. "We can be scared together."

George, where he steps closely so Dream's side, just chuckles as he turns his head over his shoulder. "My parents are nothing to be scared of, I promise. I've met a handful of other kings and queens and I can assure you they are very laid back compared to those I have met."

"They're your parents though, isn't that a biased opinion?"

"I think they're very laid back as well," Dream ends up adding into the conversation. "They always greet me during dinners. They're very kind."

They did truly seem kind. From the small interactions Dream had had with them, they were always kind to him. They always acknowledged his presence, at least. His own *parents* didn't even acknowledge his presence half the time when he lived with them. The only time he really got their attention was when he was being lectured.

"I don't know man, seems *sus* coming from you." Behind him, Sapnap quickens his pace, letting go of Skeppy in the process. Without any warning, a hand was coming to the back of Dream's head and *yanking* his ponytail out. Stopping in his tracks, he turned to Sapnap, who held his hair tie above his head with a mocked look of surprise.

"Okay, look, I know it *looks bad, but*, I was just meaning to tug on your hair, not pull it out."

"Haha, very funny," he grumbles, reaching out to snag the hair tie from the guard. "You're so very lucky I don't feel like getting into another tousle with you."

"Why, scared you're going to get your ass kicked again?"

"No, I just don't feel like getting gravel stuck into my face again," he replies bitterly, the memories of Sapnap quite literally throwing him into the gravel head first hitting him like a truck. At that, Sapnap recoils back, mumbling a quick apology from his lips. Thankfully, Dream is too busy with his eyes fixated on the guard to notice the way George's face screws into something not so kind.

With little thought he finds himself pushing his mask off, tucking the plastic into the side of his pants. It wasn't a big deal to him—especially since all three people around him already knew what he looked like, *George especially*. As he pulled his hair back, the others stopped around him, their eyes adverting to the ground as if they were not supposed to watch.

A thought prodded his mind.

He was not going to wear his mask at the party, right? Why should he even still be wearing it now? Eventually, everyone would know what he looked like. It wouldn't matter prolonging the inevitable. Unless, of course, he did change his mind and told Ranboo he would indeed wear his mask.

He was sure he wouldn't change his mind though. *He hated to be seen as a fool.*

Besides, Techno was right. He *was* different from the person who arrived here five years ago. There was *no* way anyone would recognize him unless they knew him for a while before his disappearance. That was the only thought that brought him comfort.

For years he contemplated if it was worth it—*wearing the mask, that is*. He felt like he could never live a 'normal' life with it. He stuck out more with the mask than he did without it. It seemed like a good idea at the time to hide his face when he first arrived. Minx could have been on his trail then and showed up at any minute to execute him. The mask, then, was for his own protection.

All it did now was make him an even bigger target for suspicion, didn't it?

Everyone knew of him in the kingdom—*the guard who wore a smiley face mask*. Inadvertently, he accidentally drew more attention to himself than he meant to.

Part of him thought it was *awful*—but another saw it as an opportunity. If anyone ever did come looking for him, people could easily vouch for him. He wasn't "Clayton" but *Dream* instead—*Dream*, the witty and sarcastic guard that stood in front of the walls for years. Dream, the skilled guard of Gantrick who could easily slit someone's throat in the blink of an eye. Dream, the friendly giant who got along with everyone in the village. Dream, the guard who moved up the ranks and became a personal royal guard to the *prince*.

Dream wasn't Clay, the timid Prince of Gwent. Clay was a quiet person, someone who sat and weighed out options rather than acting. Clay was a *Prince* who couldn't even stand up for his guards, let alone his people. Clay was a fucking coward—a coward who killed his guard so he could escape the throne.

Dream was the furthest thing from Clay, and that's what brought him a sense of security.

There were no parallels between the two of them.

As his hair elastic slipped from his fingers, he was moving again down the path. "Let's go."

Back at his side once again, he felt George grasp at his elbow with a feather-light touch. "You forgot your mask," he informed him quietly.

"No, I didn't," he replied. "I know where it is. Don't worry about it."

With his jaw dropping, George tightened his grip around him, tugging him closer. "Don't tell me you're not going to wear it to the dinner party."

"Why—"

"Just, tell me you're going to wear it," he interrupts, his grip hardening around his forearm. "I told you, I don't mind you wearing your mask. Is what Ranboo said still bothering you? I will tell him you're fine, seriously, Dream."

There's a softness to George's tone that has Dream *melting*.

"I guess what Ranboo said kinda pushed me in the right direction. I don't necessarily *love* hiding behind a mask," Dream finds himself explaining, "I've been contemplating not wearing it anymore for a while. I guess tonight would be a good start, huh?"

George's grip on his arm loosens, his fingers trailing from his forearm to his hand in a messy motion. The pads of the brunette's fingers tap against his palm, dragging across the calloused skin before pulling away with a quiet hum.

"Promise me that that's the only reason and that you don't feel like you're forced into not wearing it."

"I promise, you idiot."

Thankfully, neither Skeppy nor Sapnap question him on the lack of his mask, but he guesses it's because they could clearly overhear his conversation with the prince.

When they arrive inside the castle finally, Dream can't help but notice how *busy* it is. Servants are walking back and forth frantically, chefs marching down the hallways with purpose. There's chatter from every direction, and honestly, it is a bit overwhelming.

"Is it always like this in here?" Sapnap ends up asking as he slips his hand into Dream's.

Tugging at his hand, he leads Sapnap down the hall with him, George and Skeppy keeping up at their sides. "Not really, but there's usually the same amount of servants moving about," he answers, maneuvering his group through the bustling servants who all paused in front of them, bowing to George as they come and go.

"Doesn't that get boring quick?" Sapnap can't help but question after the seventeenth servant bows in front of them.

"Oh, it does, it sucks," George grumbles, tucking himself behind Dream and Sapnap with a sigh. "The faster we make it to the dining hall, the better."

Sure enough, they do eventually make it to the dining hall. Even from the hallway, Dream could hear the bustling of people, the playing of music, and the clattering of plates. Standing just a ways away from the dining hall entrance was Bad, who perked up the moment he saw the group moving toward him.

"Hey, guys! You all look so amazing," he complimented, his eyes trailing around their group

before they landed on Dream wearily. "Dream?"

"Uh—hey, Bad!" He greeted back cautiously. "You look good as well."

With a confused expression, the cook nodded before turning to Skeppy with a smile. "Skeppy, do you remember that caterer I was telling you about, Mega? He just showed up and said he would love to meet you as well!" In a moment flat, Skeppy was excusing himself from the group, following Bad happily as they entered the dining hall together.

Dream doesn't miss the way Sapnap drops his hand and looks up to him. "You saw that too, right? Not just a me thing."

"Not just a you thing," he replies.

So, Skeppy and Bad seemed close.

With a quiet cough, George was nudging between Dream and Sapnap. "We should probably head in, too. It looks like we may be some of the last people to arrive." With a reluctant nod, Dream and Sapnap followed George into the dining hall. If he thought the hallways were overwhelming, well, he was in for a surprise.

He barely recognized a single person standing in the room. The lighting seemed to be brighter than it normally was for dinners, a bright yellow hue shining from the chandeliers above them. The elongated table was already set and filled with a bizarre collection of tasty foods, some he never remembered seeing before.

So, yes. This was overwhelming, and he despised it already.

For the first few moments they're at the dinner party, Sapnap and Dream follow George blindly around as he welcomes the other guests with a happy smile. With his attention lying elsewhere, Dream couldn't help but focus on the immense amount of people in the room as well as the number of guards standing at every corner of the room.

It, sadly, reminded him of home, and the busy dining halls they would constantly have.

At some point, he's tugged away from Sapnap and George's sides with a gasp. "Dream, my man, is that you?" Tommy stood before him, accompanied by Tubbo, wearing fancy coats he never saw before. They both were holding happy smiles as they greeted him.

"Oh, hello," he finally managed to get out, feeling a bit too exposed with the way Tubbo's eyes were trailing his face excitedly.

"You're looking good! Where's your mask, Big D? Ditching it for the party?" Tommy queried excitedly, tugging at his arm.

"You could say that. How did you two even recognize me?"

Over Tommy's shoulder, Tubbo got up onto his tippy toes and motioned to the back of his head. "The ponytail. Hard to not recognize you."

With a hum, he subconsciously ran his hand over the back of his head, running his hand over his ponytail. "I never thought of that."

The two laughed happily, which was kind of funny to see. Dream couldn't pinpoint a time he'd seen the two genuinely laugh since he became a royal guard. Their conversations over the royal family's

dinner were rather quiet.

"Did you know about all of this?" Tubbo finally questions, motioning to the room around them. "Tommy and I didn't even hear about it until the king and queen left their meeting room with *guest lists, today!*"

"I didn't. Prince George didn't even know until a few hours ago," he replies, "was this really a last-minute thing?"

"I suppose, man. I kind of overheard them talking about some sort of celebration earlier this week, but I really hate to snoop."

"That's a lie, Tommy, you snoop all the time," Tubbo is quick to correct, tapping his acquaintance on the arm furiously.

With a sigh, Tommy shrugged his shoulders, looking rather defeated. "Okay, so yes, I snoop—I was just tired the day I heard them talking about the 'celebration' and didn't really care enough to find more details."

"So, they were thinking about having a party for a little, but planned it last minute?" Dream ends up questioning.

"I guess so."

"Interesting." Dream turns his head over his shoulder, realizing that he truly has lost Sapnap and George. With a sigh, he turns back to Tommy and Tubbo. "Have you guys ran into anyone else you've recognized?"

"We ran into Wilbur not too long ago! Other than that, it's just been a bunch of chefs and tailors," Tubbo replies, looking around them with quick yet frantic eyes, "you'd probably recognize some of these people, since George invited you to his party."

"How— *how* did you know about that?"

With owlish eyes, Tubbo looked up to Dream with a quirked eyebrow. "Kind of thought it was public knowledge now, the king and queen talked about it the other day over some tea. They think your friendship with the prince is quite endearing."

"*Friendship?*" Dream croaks out, his cheeks heating up.

"What, you two are friends, are you not?" Tommy questions. "You two are close in age, George talks about you quite often, and you guys do hang out often. I thought it'd be a given you two would end up being friends."

"I— isn't that, you know, unprofessional?"

The two look up to him and practically *burst* out into laughter.

"God, what village did you crawl out of?" Tommy reaches up to his shoulder and smacks him lightly. "We're not living in the eighteenth-century anymore, dude. Why would a friendship between a guard and a prince be unprofessional? They're human too, at the end of the day."

Suddenly, Dream is starting to believe that his childhood was a little more fucked up than he originally believed it was. Growing up, his parents engraved it into him that those types of friendships were dangerous. Hell, even Sapnap thought the same thing— *and he lived here his*

whole life! Why did Tommy and Tubbo have different views on *this*?

Scratch that, why did the king and queen even think they were friends in the first place?

"Oh— guess I am still stuck to old customs then, huh?"

"Does that mean you *aren't* friends with Prince George?" Tubbo asks quietly. "I'm sorry we assumed you guys were if you're not!"

"No, no, I guess you could say we are then," Dream corrects politely, smiling down at the two younger guards before him. "I think I just—"

Before he can finish his thought, there's a subtle tap at his shoulder. Turning his head, he's met with a rosy-cheeked woman who's holding a delicate smile and a glass of red wine. Her brown hair is pulled back into a quant bun, her makeup looking a bit smudged.

"Oh— sorry!"

The woman looks up to him, dropping the red drink she'd been holding to her lips. Her eyes widen as they meet gazes, and honestly, Dream just wants to jump off a balcony right then and there.

"Well, aren't you a cutie?" She beamed, tipping her head slightly. From his side, he could hear both Tubbo and Tommy chuckle subtly, coughing to cover it up. "You were the guard who wore the mask during the tailoring session, right? Dream, was it?"

He can't help but squint at the lady. She was the tailor from the other day, wasn't she?

"I'm sorry if I have mistaken you for the wrong person! I remember Advisor Ranboo talking about not wearing a mask, and I sort of recognized the hairdo so I just guessed—"

"Ah, no, you were right," Dream corrects kindly, "it's nice to see you again." He hates how he cringes at the forced formality, but the tailor doesn't seem to care, as she just grins back at him.

"The name's Christine, it's nice to see you again as well!" She raises a dainty hand to him, looking for a handshake. With a forced smile, he took her hand, shaking it carefully. He couldn't help but notice how cold she was and how her hand didn't necessarily feel right in his— *not the way George's did, at least*.

Her hand lingers in his for a moment before she pulls it away, a bubbly laugh escaping her. "Sorry for being so forward, but truly, you're a great looking person!" His cheeks don't heat up the same way they'd heat at George's compliments to him, and he loathes it. "Do you have anyone to hang with?"

Again, he is interrupted when a comforting hand lands on his shoulder, gripping it hard. It's a familiar touch, one he can lean into and feel relief from. "Sorry to interrupt you two, do you mind if I steal my guard back?"

The woman blinks, looking startled as she raises a hand. "Sorry, your highness!" Without another word, the girl is off and lost in the crowd, as if she were never there in the first place.

"God, thank you so much," he can't help but sigh, turning to meet George's eyes. "That was so awkward. Thanks a lot, *you two*, for nothing," he spat out in the direction of Tubbo and Tommy, who were now in hysterics at Sapnap's side.

"I thought you were into it! She called you a cutie!" Tommy yells in defense, leaning on Tubbo for

support as he wipes tears from his eyes. "I have never seen you interact with a woman and suddenly I know why."

"Dream just hates women," Sapnap comments, rolling his eyes as he nudged Tommy. "So many girls would hit on him when we were back in guard training and he was so *oblivious*, it was so painful to watch."

In defense, Dream raised an accusing finger at Sapnap. "First of all, none of those women even knew what I looked like, they just liked the mask and the whole mysterious vibe. Second of all, I am not the type who goes for someone who just blindly throws themselves at me."

While it was partially the truth, there were also many other factors that played a part in ignoring the many women's efforts to get his attention. One, he was still actively running from a whole ass kingdom. Two, he really wasn't that interested in romance at the time (especially after what happened with Fundy). Lastly, as much as he could appreciate a woman and their beauty, Dream tended to lean more for the other side of the spectrum.

"You like it when people play hard to get?" George suddenly questioned with a giggle. "Guess that explains a lot."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" Dream replied, his voice rising an octave.

"Oh, I don't know, Dream, you tell me." The two stood there for a moment with challenging gazes. Honest to God, George looked like he was ready to fight him again like he'd done earlier that day, and Dream wasn't sure why.

"Well, if you're not interested in Christine, maybe I can be interested in Christine!" Tommy recommends. "She seemed like a nice woman! She has a nice accent, too!"

"Christine looked twenty, Tommy," Tubbo interjected.

"Seems like a ripe age to me. C'mon Tubbo, be my wingman here."

As the two teenagers dismissed themselves, Dream still found himself stuck in George's intense gaze.

"I'm serious, what was that supposed to mean?"

With a smirk, George was rising to his tippy toes, planting a steady hand to Dream's shoulder as he whispered into his ear, "you *did* chase me around the castle for a week straight without a complaint. Didn't you?"

Heat rises to his cheeks as he frantically pushes the prince back with a soft push. "Oh, you're an idiot," he replies way too fondly. Out of the corner of his eye, he can tell Sapnap even caught onto it. His eyebrows are raised suspiciously, a smile pulled on his face.

"What, I was answering your question seriously," George replied, jutting out his bottom lip in a mocked pout. "Guess I won't answer your questions anymore."

"I can live with that."

With a hum, George was linking his arm with Dream's, similarly to how they did when Dream took George out of the castle. "Come along, my parents were just asking about you."

Dream allows George to lead him through the crowd with poise, keeping him tucked closely at his

side. People they pass bid them quick hellos but George is quick to wave them on, uttering a quiet apology. Sapnap follows up behind them, looking a little startled at all the unfamiliar faces as his fingers hover over his friend's elbow. He's a hair away from reaching out, but upon realizing his arms are linked with the prince's, he retracts his hand with a warm smile.

Dream couldn't help but wonder why the king and queen were looking for him as his arm tightened around George's, but he tried not to dwell on it, too busy bathing in the warmth that radiated from his prince.

At some point, they break through a dense crowd of tailors and caterers only to find the king and queen standing amidst them, smiling cheerfully as they raise their respective wine glasses. It takes them but a moment to realize the break in the crowd, but nevertheless their eyes land on them with glee.

"There you are, George!" The queen had called out, her accent showing more prominently than Dream remembered hearing it before. "Ah— *Dream*?"

With rosy cheeks, Dream is unlinking his arm with the prince, giving the king and queen a curt bow. "Your majesties," he greeted carefully, his eyes scanning the aluminum floor beneath him. His mind ran back to earlier, thinking back to Sapnap and Skeppy's conversation about how they were nervous to meet the king and queen. Despite having a good amount of encounters with the two of them by now, Dream still found himself nervous. This encounter seemed more personal. It wasn't just a passing 'hello, how are you' before dinner.

There's a small push at his shoulder and he realizes that Sapnap has followed his lead, bowing before the king and queen. They lock eyes for a moment, Sapnap rolling his eyes before they both stood.

"It's a pleasure to see you two, again," Dream finds himself saying, despite how forced it sounds to his own ears. The two give him an odd glance before the queen is handing over her wine to her husband.

"Oh, Dream, it is you! I almost didn't recognize you without your mask!" Suddenly, the queen's gloved hands are reaching out for one of his. With both hands wrapped around one of his, she shakes it excitedly. "You look dashing!"

With wide eyes, Dream turns slightly to catch George's eyes. They share a quick glance before he returns his attention to the queen. "Ah, thank you, your majesty. You look extravagant tonight."

Letting his hand slip from her grasps, she laughs. It's a quiet bubbly laugh, one that reminds him of George's. "Thank you, dear! We had actually just sent George to fetch you." Behind her, the king shifts, taking a step closer to his wife.

Faintly, he feels intimidated.

"We just wanted to thank you dearly, for all the work you have done! We know that you were pushed into this position rather quickly, but it seems that you have adjusted quite well. We truly appreciate you looking out for our son." He's taken back by the sudden *compliment*, a silent 'oh' escaping him rather than a coherent thought. "It's quite different being in the castle, isn't it?"

Clearing his throat, he finds himself linking his hands together at the small of his back. "Ah, it is quite different, but in a good way," he replies, hoping it sounds earnest enough. "There truly is no reason to thank me, though, your majesty. I am just doing my job."

The queen squints at him with one eye, her grin growing bigger. "Oh, don't be silly! You have done more than just your job. You make George rather happy, too."

"Oh, mum, don't be so sappy," George groans from his side.

The queen turns to him, hushing him quietly. "Don't be silly, your guard deserves the recognition, George!"

Dream can feel his cheeks heating. What on Earth did the king and queen have to thank him for? He was just doing his job, after all. It wasn't like it had been much so far, just following after the prince day in and day out around the castle. There had been no threats yet, so all he'd really been doing was poorly 'babysitting' the prince. It wasn't a lot. It was barely anything, actually.

"Dream, we have heard nothing but good things about you. You are truly an esteemed guard and we are glad to have you around the castle. We hope that you feel welcomed here, as we all plan for you to stick around a while, I hope?"

Dream can't help but blink down to the queen. "I— thank you so much. I do feel very welcomed here, actually! I plan to stay as long as George wishes for me to."

At the queen's side now, George rolls his eyes and slightly pokes his tongue out at Dream, who can't help but give a small huff of laughter.

Finally averting their attention off of him, the queen and king finally address Sapnap. "You must be Sapnap, if I am correct?" He drowns out their conversation, his attention solely set on George.

He watches as the prince's gaze lands on Sapnap carefully—watches the way his long eyelashes bat against his cheeks—watches the way his lips part with a smile. The sound of the party around him turns to static and white noise as he finds himself caught in George's presence. Eventually, George's lips start to move as he talks, but the words don't land on his ears. He's not broken out of his trance until he sees a glass of wine being pushed into George's hands by a servant and the queen is telling them she will see them soon.

As the two walk back into the crowd, George stands in front of Dream and Sapnap. "Are you sure you're no longer a drinker, Dream?"

"Very painfully sure," he replies as Sapnap's hand claps him on the back with a laugh.

"Count me down for a drink though!"

And so; the party goes on. Dream is pushed and pulled around by George and Sapnap as they idly chat with the castle servants. He adds to some conversations, ignores others. The air around him was starting to smell distinctively of wine and other drinks he couldn't be bothered to name. The more drinks that are thrown into George and Sapnap's hands, the more the two started joking with one another. Dream kind of finds it endearing, watching what he could only guess as friendship budding between the two of them.

"You look like you're ready to smash the glass—"

"I'm going to smash it over your head if you keep stepping on my toes, Mr. high heels."

"Do you talk to all royals this way, Snapmap?"

"What the hell did you just call me—"

Dream couldn't help but laugh as he pushed the two away from one another.

At some point, they run into Skeppy and Bad, who are thankfully very sober. Dream chats with the two of them, feeling a bit safer in their company than he did in George's and Sapnap's.

"Oh, did I forget to tell you that George loves to drink. Not only that, he's such a lightweight," Bad informs him somewhere in between their conversation. *"A couple drinks in his hand and he's out for the night."*

"Wow, thanks for the heads up, Bad."

Guess it made sense why he suggested they go to a bar if they were to leave the kingdom.

Eventually, everyone is called to gather at the dining table as a servant clanks a spoon against a glass. Dream visibly relaxes when he hears the sound, knowing that the party would now settle as they gathered to eat.

The seating went as such: the queen and king sat at one head of the table, George at the other. On George's right side sat Dream, with Sapnap on his side. On his left sat Bad, Skeppy on his other side. Tommy and Tubbo had managed to snag seats beside Sapnap, the rest of the table cluttered with people Dream couldn't really put names to.

Dream, Sapnap, and Skeppy seem all too overwhelmed by the stuffed plates in front of them with warm food to catch George and Bad's conversation with Tommy and Tubbo.

"How did things go with Christine, Tommy?" George laughed for a moment before hiccuping, looking awfully surprised and scared by the sound.

Tommy wheezed, slamming an open palm onto the table. "I wouldn't know, I didn't actually follow her. Twenty is too old—"

"And illegal!" Bad scolded, pointing a finger at Tommy, who only began to laugh harder at the accusation.

"He actually was going to go after her, we just got sidetracked by some of the other caterers," Tubbo interjects. "He was disappointed bu—"

A hand is slapped over Tubbo's face. "No, don't finish that."

There's another hiccup from the end of the table. This time, it does catch Dream's attention. George sits beside him, staring at his now empty glass.

"Don't tell me," he groaned, catching the prince's attention, "you're already drunk, aren't you?"

With an offended gasp, George placed his glass back onto the table with care. "I only had like, three drinks. I feel nothing."

"Your hiccups and your flushed cheeks are telling another story," Sapnap teased, raising his fork accusingly at the prince, "I had like five and I am perfectly fine."

Their conversation dwindles down as they all begin to dig into their dinner. As Dream had expected, the party became quiet, only the hushed whispers between the servants between bites could be heard.

His palpitated heart finally eased as he ate in peace.

With all the commotion, he had totally forgotten about the fact that his mask still hung at the hem of his slacks. He forgot how graciously he savored not having to wear a mask.

Needless to say, Dream thinks the dinner party goes well. Eventually, the guests began to bid their goodbyes to George as they left. The prince half acknowledged them as he sent them a happy, yet dazed, smile and waved them on.

Bad, sadly, was right. George was *totally* a light weight. If he had to guess, the brunette barely took three drinks that whole night. Three drinks wasn't a lot, especially compared to the six Sapnap had, but nevertheless, his pale cheeks were flushed.

It hadn't been until the rest of the guests flushed from the room, the king and queen gone as well, that George finally stood from his seat with a yawn, his only company being Dream and Sapnap.

"I'm tired," he grumbled, stretching his arms over his head with a yawn.

Dream couldn't help but scoff as he stood as well, motioning for Sapnap to follow. "Lucky for you, the party's over."

With dead eyes, George stared him down. "Really, I didn't notice. God, I thought we were still mid-party."

Dream bites his lip, urging himself to not laugh, but behind him Sapnap *crackles* at the joke as if it were the funniest thing in the world. With a weak hand, he turned and slapped at Sapnap's shoulder, telling him it really was not that funny. The tipsy man did not listen to him though, at all.

"Let's just get you to your tower and call it a night," Dream sighed, rubbing his temples as he pushed his seat back in, motioning for the two to follow.

"A *tower*. You live in a tower, Georgie? You're a princess!" Sapnap cheered as he draped himself over Dream's arm with a smile. "Princess Georgie."

"That's enough from you." Dream pushed Sapnap off of him, feeling his own cheeks heat in second-hand embarrassment. "Let's go, please."

His original plan was to have the tipsy two follow him back to George's tower, bid George a good night, and then drag Sapnap back to the guards' quarters. It seemed simple, right? It had just been a dinner party after all, nothing too big and extravagant to get wasted for.

Dream *thought* it was a good idea. Thought it was a brilliant one, actually. Thought it was the most basic idea in the book, you know, until he watched George stumble away from the table and land into Sapnap's arms with a huff, his head rolling on the guard's shoulder as he mouthed a quick 'ouch.'

"Okay, okay, *great*," he grumbled out to no one in particular. Clicking his tongue, Dream scooped George off of Sapnap, forcing him to put an arm around his shoulders. Shakily, George complied, standing a bit straighter. "Sapnap, *you* can walk, right?"

A minute later, with George stuck between the two of them, Sapnap and Dream were making their way to George's tower.

"You two are so strong," George giggled.

"You're like a hundred pounds wet, don't flatter us," Dream replied bitterly.

Dream kind of thought seeing George drunk would be a funny sight, but it was far from that. Dream was tired, exhausted from the party and having to interact with others. His bones ached from his sparring match earlier that morning. He *really* was tired, tired to the point where he felt moody.

It didn't help that George was stumbling over his steps, his eyebrows drawn down in mock focus, his tongue sticking out the slightest. Dream really thought he'd think it was cute if the circumstances had been different.

When they made it to the tower and Dream pushed the door open, Sapnap, quite literally, dropped to the floor with a cry. With wide eyes and quick hands, Dream was grabbing George by the waist, pulling him against his chest.

The prince only laughed, nuzzling his forehead against his guard's neck.

"*Why.* Why are there so many stairs?" Sapnap cried from the floor, pulling at his hair. "You walk these every day?"

"Sucks, doesn't it. Am I carrying the prince up myself, or are you helping?"

Scrambling back up to his feet, Sapnap grabbed ahold of George again. After a few minutes of readjusting their grips and stumbling over one another, Sapnap and Dream were carefully pulling George up the stairs, the prince groaning as they did.

"It's like dragging a dead body up the stairs," Sapnap joked, peaking over George's hanging head to meet eyes with Dream. "Think we'll get caught?"

Dream mocked a laugh, turning his attention back to the steps under them. "I hope so. Maybe I'll be put out of my misery sooner."

Ten or so minutes later, Dream was pushing the door to George's bedroom open, urging Sapnap to let him go. George groaned at the loss of the contact, reaching out for Sapnap with a tired grumble. Dream just ushered him to his bed without another word, forcing the prince to sit down.

"You guys are leaving so soon?"

"Yes, it's dark and we're all tired," Dream responded, yawning right after. "Good night, George. I'll be back tomorrow morning."

Sapnap was already waiting at the threshold of the door for him, gripping at the door tiredly. As he took a step toward his fellow guard, there was a hand grasping at his tunic greedily. With a yelp, Dream was toppling back over his own feet, his back landing against George's bed with a thump.

Dream's eyes stayed on the doorway long enough to watch Sapnap shake his head and walk out. With two hard blinks, he turned his head up.

George was looking down at him, his eyes half-lidded, his cheeks flushed a pretty pink. The moonlight was sweeping into the room through the balcony doors, illuminating the prince in the night light. "You should stay," he whispers, his voice hoarse, his accent showing more prominently. The suggestion has Dream's stomach knotting with something, something he doesn't like.

He's quick to clear his throat, turning his head back down. "No. I'll be back tomorrow morning."

George whines, suddenly slipping down from the edge of his bed to sit on the floor beside Dream.

With a shaky hand, he reached out and wrapped his fingers around Dream's wrist. "You'll have to come back anyway, just *stay*."

Dream stares down at his shoes, his cheeks heating. There was no way he could even consider whatever the hell George was suggesting, not with how drunk he clearly was.

"George," he breathed out, screwing his eyes shut, "this isn't funny. Get up, please. I have to go."

"But—"

"No, no buts," Dream quickly cut him off, pulling his arm away from him. "You're drunk. Go to bed."

Without letting him get another word in, Dream was standing up, turning to pull George up as well. The prince looked up at him with sad eyes.

"Did— did I do something wrong?"

As he managed to get George to sit down again, he shook his head, crouching in front of him. "No, you didn't do anything wrong. You just need to rest," he replied. Refusing to look back to his face, Dream helped him work his dress shoes off, dropping them to the floor beside his bed.

When both shoes were off and George scrambled up onto his bed, Dream turned back to the door, *refusing* to turn around again.

"Good night, George."

"Wait, Dream!" Dream stops in his tracks, turning his head over his shoulder. He doesn't bear to meet eyes with the prince, instead, his eyes settling on the balcony doors. "Tomorrow night. Let's sneak out tomorrow night."

A quiet chuckle escapes his lips.

"No, George. Your party is two days away, you will be exhausted."

"I don't care," George stated, his voice rising a little. "I really don't care, as long as I get to leave with you, I don't care how tired I am. I want to be free for one night—*free with you*."

As his words sink in, Dream realizes how royally *fucked* he is. He's rolling his hands into fists, turning to look at the floor. George was drunk. He didn't mean what he was saying. He didn't know how his words affected Dream.

"I'll think about it," he musters to say, not wanting to stay in the bedroom any longer. Pressing his dull nails into his palms, he turns to the bedroom door, "good night. Please, just go to sleep."

George doesn't reply. He doesn't give him enough time to.

The moment he steps out of the door, Sapnap is standing there, wringing his hands cautiously. "Is everything okay?"

"It doesn't matter. Let's go."

Off They Go

Chapter Summary

"Clay," he finds himself correcting— surprising himself.

When he turns to the latter, the brunette's eyes are white, his eyebrows turned upward.

"What?"

Clearing his throat, he turns to look out toward the river. "My name, it's Clay."

In the first few moments of his morning haze, his head replays the memories of the night before as if it were a picture film. He was well aware that at the time, he wasn't in the right headspace to take everything in properly. The essence of it, the party that is, reminded him of home. Back in Gwent dinner parties happened regularly. His father and mother always invited war majors to dinners to discuss the nitty-gritty details of upcoming battles and then promptly after, they'd get wasted as if it were their last drinks on Earth.

The party last night was nothing like that—it held a happy crowd, a crowd that *wanted* to be there. Everyone was so cheery and delightful, and yet, Dream couldn't enjoy any of it. He was never good at processing things when he was in a state like *that*— a state where he was stuck between thoughts and the past—a state where he felt so tired he could just curl on the floor and cry.

He didn't, thankfully, but *God* was he close when George had pulled him to the floor of his bedroom. He wanted so desperately to fall into the prince's arms—to fulfill his desires and *stay*, but he knew better than that. He knew better than to take advantage of a situation like *that*.

Was George just too drunk to realize what he was asking? Did he really want Dream to stay the night? Did he even understand the *implications* that came with that?

Those questions haunted him as he got up, got dressed, and left the guard's quarters without another word. They haunted him with every step he took back up to the castle, haunted him as he ran his hands up and down his exposed face, and haunted him right up to the moment he arrived back in front of George's bedroom door.

He didn't even have to knock for George to open the bedroom door, already dressed and ready for the day. The prince gave him a quick once over before looking right up at him with gleaming eyes.

"Good morning, Dream!"

With a scoff, Dream stepped into the bedroom. "I'm surprised you're even awake and not dying from a nasty hangover," he commented, eyes trailing to the always opened balcony doors.

"I don't usually get hangovers when I drink," George huffed, his nose scrunched like a bunny. Now with a clear head, Dream thought *that* was just downright adorable. "I didn't drink that much last night anyway. A few drinks while I'm tired always knocks me out."

"As if you'd even remember last night."

He says it as a joke. He doesn't expect George to actually answer.

"Of course I remember last night," the brunette huffed, taking a confident step toward the balcony doors, his arms wrapped up around himself. "You said you'd think about taking me out there tonight, right?" He points out of the balcony doors to the swooping mountains and Dream's heart drops.

He remembered.

He remembered him turning down his offer to stay the night—

"I didn't think you actually meant it, going out so soon. You were drunk— your birthday is literally *tomorrow*," Dream finds himself saying, faltering over his words a bit. George just laughs at him, tipping his head back as he did, as if he were mocking him.

"I know, I know I was drunk. Drunk me is just a little more courageous, I think," he answers pointedly before turning on the ball of his foot, the most serious expression played on his face. "You should take me out there, as an early birthday present."

A little more courageous?

"Wait, George—" He's so tempted to ask about what he meant when he asked him to stay, tempted to ask if he felt the same way about him as he did for him, but he stops himself. He bites his bottom lip, completely forgoing the question.

A guard shouldn't feel that way for his prince. Things would only get messy from there.

"I'm not answering whatever you're about to ask me until you tell me for sure you'll take me outside of the kingdom tonight." The way he speaks isn't harsh, but nevertheless, it has Dream dropping his jaw, his lips parting in a smile.

"Wow, you're so eager to spend an entire night somewhere random," Dream comments, feeling it's the safest thing to say. "Do you even know where you want to go once we get past the gates?"

"Does this mean you'll take me out tonight?"

"Depends. Where do you want to go?"

The prince breaks out into a grin as he begins to shut the balcony doors, turning his back to him. He hums, allowing the doors to lock as he hangs on their handles.

"You said there are villages close by, right?"

"Right," he parrots back, thinking back to when he ran to Gantrick on foot. He'd passed two villages close by, one that was right on the water and one that was deeper in the forest.

"Let's go visit a random village, for the fun of it." The prince turns, his eyes now crinkled with a full-blown smile. "We can visit their bakery, and then their market, and then a tavern. Just the two of us— *you know*, Dream and George."

"Wouldn't it have just been the two of us, anyway?" He finds himself asking, a bit confused by the prince's wording.

"Well, yes, but I mean... You know, instead of the whole 'Prince George and his royal guard, Dream' thing, it'll just be us— *the real us*. We can pretend to be normal for one night."

Normal, for one night. He liked the sound of that more than he wanted to admit it.

Instead of admitting it, he prods at the prince in a jokingly manner. "What, do you think we're not normal?"

"I don't know," George responds, his smile falling the lightest. "I just think that when we're in the castle we act differently than we want to. Does that make sense?"

Dream understands *perfectly*. If it were not for the walls of the castle (and kingdom for that matter) that beckoned him to be a proper person, that beckoned him to keep up his mask, then he'd probably be a different person. If he lived a different life like a normal person, he'd probably be a jokester, someone that could easily roll with the punches with a smile. He'd probably be way more of a risk-taker, too; be a little bolder, let himself actually be seen rather than question whether or not his actions were *correct*.

There were a lot of things he'd want to do if he were not a guard—*if he were not a runaway prince*.

He'd travel the world, go as far as the horizon took him. He'd never wear a mask again, he would just proudly wear his face wherever he went with a smile. He'd climb the highest mountains—swim the largest oceans—do whatever the hell his body could take. He'd shout from cliff tops with glee, swim in streams without any shame. He'd *enjoy* life, live a life that was worth living. Most of all, he'd want to fall in love. *Shamelessly* and *hopelessly* fall in love.

Maybe in another life, he could carelessly and hopelessly fall for George once again. Maybe in that life, he'd be able to love him the way he deserved. Maybe in that life, they'd be normal. Maybe in that life, he'd never have to wonder what being *normal* truly meant—but until then, he was stuck in this lifetime, living through a persona, pretending to be the shell of someone he was not, pretending that those feelings of attraction couldn't be much more than just *attraction*.

With an awkward chuckle, he just shook his head, pretending to not understand what George meant, despite the fact that he did.

"Not really. Care to explain?"

The prince turns his eyes to him. "I thought you were smarter than this."

"Forgive me, I'm tired. Explain, please."

With a huff, George adverts his eyes. "I just think, once we're outside of this castle—*outside of this kingdom*—we can just be whoever we want to be, without having to act for a role. Is that a better explanation?"

"Are you suggesting we go *wild, princess?*"

"If that's how you want to put it, then yes," George admits, hastily taking his bottom lip in under his teeth. "I'd love to go wild with you, Dream."

The rest of their day goes as follows: Dream, without hesitation, agrees to sneak out with George that night (despite the worries he has, he stifles them and agrees when he sees the smile that breaks across the prince's face like the sun rising after a storm.) When George began to pack a bag of supplies they may need, Dream went on a search around the castle for Ranboo. Once the guard had found the royal advisor, he'd informed him that the prince had "fallen ill" and would be resting for the entire day. Ranboo, frantic and worried about how this would affect his birthday the next day, shook Dream *senseless*. Dream urged the prince would be fine tomorrow (because he would be, he wasn't sick) and that he just needed rest. He then asked him to inform the king and queen of the prince's sudden ailment and went on his way.

Their white lie seemed to work. In the two hours they sat in silence in the prince's bedroom, no one paid a visit. No one called the prince down for anything either, which they took as a good sign.

"We should head out now before the sun starts setting," the prince suggested after an eternity of silence. "We don't want to arrive late at night and have everything be closed for the night."

And so, Dream listened. The guard discarded his armor to the corner of the room as the prince changed into something more "bland." Once they were ready, both wearing cloaks of similar colors, they padded down the stairs of the tower and threw open the window.

"How many times are we going to sneak in and out of this window, *princess*?" Dream couldn't help but laugh as the prince slipped through the window, shooting daggers at his guard.

"I don't know, Dream, aren't you supposed to be the one stopping me from sneaking in and out?" George raises a challenging eyebrow as he dropped to the grass gracefully, a mischievous grin plastered across his face. With a sigh, Dream shook his head as the prince extended a hand toward him, a gesture of help. Despite knowing damn well he didn't need the assistance, he took the hand graciously, reveling in the warmth that George radiated as he pulled himself through the window frame.

"If we want to get anywhere and get back at a reasonable time, I think we *may* have to borrow a horse," Dream commented as he closed the window behind him, missing the contact he once held with George.

"Okay," he sounded in agreement, "let's sneak over to the stables. Do you know how to ride a horse?"

With a snort, Dream turned around, downcasting his eyes toward the prince. "Do *I* know how to ride a horse? Who do you think you're talking to?"

"You just strike me as the type of person who doesn't know how to ride, that's all."

"Should I be offended?"

"Greatly."

With a cheeky smile, George pulled up the hood to the borrowed cloak, turning his attention elsewhere. Too distracted, Dream hadn't noticed the hand that was reaching out for his. The moment George finally grabbed hold of him, he was being tugged through the garden with an assemble of giggles attacking him. Dream found that he didn't mind much, especially when George's laughs sounded like music to his ears.

When they made it to the stables, they hushed one another as they peered into them. Finding that they had been all but empty, excluding the horses and such, they trotted right in.

"I'm guessing you've ridden a horse before, right?" Dream found himself asking as George paused in front of one of the stables, eyes focused on the large amber horse that resided within it.

"I did when I was much younger. Maybe thirteen? I haven't had the chance to ride since."

George pushed open the stable, grabbing onto the reins of the horse with care. Dream watched in careful silence as the brunette cooed at the horse, leading him out of his stable with care. "I'm sure Dream will take good care of you."

"Oh, so *I* am the one who's going to be 'stirring' the horse?"

With a sharp gaze, George turned his head over his shoulder. "You're the one who knows where we should go, are you not?"

He didn't put up a fight after that, not like he wanted to anyway. Taking a confident step toward the horse, he took the reins from George and patted its mane with care.

"I am pretty sure her name is Ember, but I may be wrong," George informed him as he pulled himself up onto the saddle, pleasantly surprised that the horse didn't try and move as he did.

Once he was situated on the saddle, he turned down to meet George's gaze. "Pretty fitting, I think," he laughed out before leaning down, extending an open palm to the prince. There was no hesitation as George grabbed onto his hand, no ounce of questioning as he allowed him to pull him up onto the saddle.

The moment George was settled in front of him, his back pressed against his chest, Dream felt the world come to a halt. He *perhaps* hadn't taken into account the fact that riding a horse together meant sitting so damn close, that he'd practically be holding George in his arms; not that he was complaining though. It was nice having him so close.

As he began to lead the horse out of the stable, something hit him. There were a few things that Dream had failed to take into account when they decided to leave so early in the day. One, there were still guards stationed around the castle. How on Earth were they supposed to get past them without causing a scene? And two, there would still be guards at the *gate*, one of which would be Sapnap himself.

When he'd brought his worries to George as he led the horse to the proper path, all he said was, "we tell them we're letter boys going out to deliver something special for the king."

So, he listened. It sounded like a reasonable idea.

When they were stopped at the exit of the castle premise, questioned to state their business for leaving, George pulled a stray piece of paper from his satchel, taking Dream back. Surely, the paper had been stamped with the royal seal. He was honestly *impressed* that George had been so prepared.

"We're taking a letter from the king to the village over," he informed him, mocking an accent he couldn't quite put his finger on. He did all he could to hold in a laugh as the other guards glanced at the paper and nodded, backing away and motioning for them to pass through.

As they did, George sighed, pressing up closer against his chest.

"That was a funny accent, *princess*," he commented, refusing to glance down.

"Thanks, I tried sounding like you."

He scrunched his nose. "What?"

"You heard me, I was mocking *you*. You and your weird accent."

This time, Dream erupted into a fit of laughter, wheezing as he did. "I am the one with a weird accent? Okay then."

They didn't initiate conversation again after that. In carefully crafted silence, Dream lead their horse down the path and through the kingdom, toward the gates that would lead them far from there. Despite his attention certainly being on the road ahead of them, Dream couldn't quite ignore

the way George shifted in his arms, his head turning every once in a while like he was surveying the land around them.

Part of him wished that he could tell George to bring his hood down so he could see him, but he decided against it. He knew that it'd only lead to more of a distraction.

It took them all but thirty minutes to reach the gates, which was twenty or so minutes faster than it took walking. Not that Dream necessarily took count of how long it took, he just knew it was much faster than it was walking.

As their horse trotted up to the gates, Dream's eyes landed on one familiar guard. He was standing tall at the gates, his red cloak swinging behind him in the cold October air. His eyes caught his in a moment flat. Ashamed, he dipped his head down, inhaling sharply.

There was no way Sapnap wouldn't recognize them and stop them.

As he brought Ember to a halt, Sapnap was the one approaching them, a guard at his toes (Dream believed his name was Punz, but he didn't really remember).

"State your business," he spoke, projecting his voice. His tone was laced with seriousness, a tone that Dream didn't hear all too often from his friend.

Thankfully, George was the one answering, mocking an accent once more as he retrieved the 'letter' from his satchel. "We're delivering a letter from the king to the village over."

Raising an eyebrow, Sapnap threw his head over his shoulder, glancing out of the gates. "Which village?"

George squirmed in his arms for a moment, tilting his head up. He silently cursed at himself for not informing the prince beforehand. Clearing his throat and raising his voice an octave, Dream replied.

"Northwick."

There was some sort of hesitance to Sapnap as he turned back around, folding his hands in front of him. His eyes didn't meet either of them this time, instead, his attention was set on the horse.

"Okay," he finally spoke after a few beats of silence, "safe travels."

The guard behind him motioned for them to move. As fast as he could, he was regaining his grip on Ember's reins, signaling for her to move.

As they broke through from the gates and into the forest just outside of Gantrick, George was leaning back into him, wrapping his arms around both of his.

"Oh my God," he laughed out, dipping his head back against his chest. Unable to help himself, he glanced down, his eyes catching George's.

"We did it!"

Truthfully, Dream didn't like getting caught up in the little moments of life. He never had the luxury of just simply 'living in the moment.' Living in the moment meant that he would be enjoying himself, and God knows he never got to enjoy himself.

Back in Gwent, every day was another day for him to survive. He dealt with his parents' beatings,

dealt with being molded into the perfect prince, and in his free time, he schemed his plan for abandoning it all. He lived his days in fear—*fear that his plan would get ruined*—fear that his parents would inevitably find out about the act of treason he'd commit. He felt immense guilt every day knowing he'd leave his family—knowing he'd be leaving Fundy—knowing he'd be leaving his *kingdom*. He had been there only hope for long, and yet, he knew as long as his parents were alive he'd be nothing but their little puppet. He'd drive Gwent to shambles. Like they said; like father, like son. He could have only lasted so long back at home until he started to become like his parents. He did the only reasonable thing by leaving. He was saving his country from another tyrannical ruler.

The moment he fled from Gwent, he was living on a day-to-day basis. His time fending for himself truly humbled him. He spent every day running, wondering if it'd be his last. It was hard to enjoy any day during that time. Those three months had been the worst months of his life.

Since he'd stepped into Gantrick, he had to carefully play the role as "Dream." Every day, he hid under a mask—under the persona of a person he wasn't. It was hard to enjoy life when you had to pretend to be someone you weren't. Sure, he had friends—he had Sapnap, Skeppy, Tommy, Tubbo, Niki, Wilbur, and if he could even count him as a friend, Techno. They made the whole 'living in secrecy' worth it. They kept him sane.

Just because life was a little better didn't mean he allowed himself to get caught in the better moments in life. He knew that eventually, those moments would be ruined. If he wasn't careful enough he'd ruin all the progress he made. It only took one false move, one false feeling of safety, and everything he had worked for in the past five years would crumble before him.

After all this time—all these *years* of being so careful—all these years of working to the position he was in—he was *slipping*. He'd been slipping ever since he was appointed George's guard, and he knew that well enough.

The notion he'd been slipping had officially been solidified when he found himself enjoying the soft moment life had thrown at him—George, wrapped in his arms as they fled into the forest surrounding Gantrick on horseback—George, his laugh echoing around them as he chanted "We did it, Dream! We did it!"—George, feeling warm in his arms despite how cold the last day of October was.

For the first time in his life, he let himself get swept into the moment. He cherished the way George clung to his arms a little harder as Ember picked up her pace, lavished in the way George's body felt pressed against his, savored every damn laugh that the prince gave out like it'd be the last time hearing the sweet tune.

Was George his one false feeling of safety?

George made him make all the wrong decisions. It wasn't his fault, though. Dream would never put any blame onto the brunette. George never meant to break his walls. He never meant to make him feel something. God, he didn't even know Dream's backstory—but part of him *wanted* the latter to know. He wanted to spill everything to him, even if it meant he hated him afterward.

For the first time in what seemed like forever—Dream was crumbling. He should have seen it faster. He should have seen it in the way he fit in at George's side, he should have seen it in the way he'd bend himself just to see the prince smile, he should have seen it when he'd agreed to sneak the prince out just a few weeks prior.

He'd fallen head over heels for the prince—for *George*.

The further they delved into the forest, the longer George sat there wrapped in his arms like it was where he was meant to be—the faster his heart raced.

He was royally screwed.

He was, shamelessly, in love—and there was *nothing* he could do about it now.

As the wind around them picked up, causing both of their hoods to finally fall, Dream tried his hardest to focus on the weaving trees before him and Ember's reins despite the sudden realization he had.

If George had picked up on how fast his heart was racing now, he didn't make it apparent. He was too busy clenching onto his forearms, his head raised to the sky in awe as they passed the overhanging trees.

"It's all so *pretty*," he spoke in awe, a breath catching in his throat.

Dream clenched onto the reins a little harder, focusing on steering Ember away from the large tree trunks. "It'll look a lot better once we reach the river just up here. We're going to follow it all the way up to Northwick."

George only hummed at the new information, entirely too caught up in the new surroundings around him. For a faint moment, Dream thought that George looked like a child seeing a candy store for the first time. He was sure he would have had the same reaction too when he left Gwent if he didn't have an assassin up his ass every few days.

So—the two of them revealed in the moment like it would never pass. Pushed up against one another as they flew through the enchanting forest, it felt like nothing could ever change. Dream allowed himself to get wrapped in the moment—he allowed every emotion he felt to course through his body without shame. Excitement and thrill from having escaped Gantrick, a hint of scaredness at the thought of being caught, and most of all the overwhelming feeling of *care* he felt as he held onto Ember's reins with one hand, allowing the other to slink around George's waist.

"Is this okay?" He'd whispered into the shell of George's ear.

There was hesitation in the way George settled against his touch. "Yeah—*yeah*, of course."

It didn't take them long to find the river. As Ember broke through a small opening in the forest, she trotted right up against the river which was already beginning to freeze in the coldness. Steering her away from the edge of the bank, Dream followed the river until the sun began to set in front of them.

It was a beautiful sight in his eyes. The sun was beginning to set behind the crests of the mountains in front of them, the horizon line in front of them littered with trees as the river broke a path for them to follow. Despite it all, George was still the best part of the whole view—situated right between his arms with a brilliant smile across his face.

This was the one moment in his life he wouldn't change for anything, Dream decided.

He'd live the life he lived a thousand times over again if it meant he'd be brought to this exact moment again and again—and that was a *terrifying* thought.

But, at least it was the truth.

It must have been an hour later when the sun was almost hidden completely behind the mountains

that they saw the first signs of the village. Smoke was rising between the trees in small puffs, and in the distance, Dream could smell fresh bread being baked.

"Oh my God, whatever that is, it smells so good," George spoke aloud his thoughts and he couldn't help but laugh. He pulled at the reins, bringing Ember to a small trot as he loosened his grip on George's hip.

"It smells like they're baking bread in a bakery."

In a small and innocent voice, George was looking up to him. "Can we get some? I am starving right now."

He couldn't help but say yes.

Just a few moments later, they were arriving in a *busy* village. Despite how late it was, people were still walking the streets, chatting away like no tomorrow.

The entire sight radiated pure delight and happiness and Dream couldn't get enough of it. It was so hard these days to find a village that wasn't rotting away in poverty and sickness. Truthfully it had been a damn stretch for them to even show up here without any news if it was doing well—but, at least they gambled right.

Eventually, they found a place to tie up Ember. At the entrance of the village, several other horses were tied up in front of bales of hay and canisters of water, a nice set up that even Gantrick didn't have.

The moment Dream slipped from Ember's back, George was following after him with grabby hands.

"Woah there!"

Dream had just caught onto George's hands before he went tumbling off her back—very ungracefully, at that.

Squeezing his hands a little tighter, George looked up to him with wide eyes. "I thought you were going to catch me faster than that."

"Why did you think I was going to catch you? You are definitely more than capable of dismounting a horse yourself."

Having yet to let go of him, George turned his head back to Ember. "She's tall, and you know, I'm short—you have a good few inches on me. Besides! You're my guard, aren't you supposed to look after me?"

Dream couldn't help but notice the way George's cheeks flushed with red in the mid-afternoon glow.

"Huh, I don't know about that one. We're not in Gantrick anymore, I'm just *Dream*."

Despite the joke, Dream couldn't help but think no matter what, he'd still protect George with all his might.

With a chuckle, he dropped George's hands and made his way back over to Ember, grabbing her reins and leading her closer to the other horses. After a beat, George was following after him, stumbling over his words.

"I— That's a low one, Dream!"

"No," he drawled out sarcastically, "you were the one who said we're just *normal* people, tonight. Don't blame me!"

After getting Ember situated, it took George no longer than a blink of an eye to grab Dream's hand into his own eagerly, tugging him straight to the village. "Hurry up, I am *starving!*"

For the second time that day, he let George lead him as they walked through the unfamiliar village.

They passed many shops, each being lit with an abundant assortment of candles in the window. They passed crowds of people, all of who waved happily at them with wide smiles. Dream couldn't help but smile and wave back as George eagerly tugged him toward the very obvious baker at the center of the village.

The two of them stepped in line at the bakery with ease, George locking their elbows as they did. "I brought some extra gold pieces," he informed him, bringing his free hand to his satchel. "We should get two loaves of that sweet-smelling bread. I am going to literally melt if I don't get some."

"It smells like cinnamon," Dream added, turning his attention to the baker behind the counter. "Cinnamon bread is so nice."

At his side, George picked his head up a little higher. "I haven't had cinnamon bread since last year, I forgot how good it is."

A few orders later, they were next at the counter; George made their order, dropping the gold pieces to the counter with eagerness. The baker gave them a smile, starting a small conversation with the two of them.

"Are you guys just visiting?"

"We're traveling, wanted to take a quick pit-stop here," Dream finds himself replying, a small smile dancing on his face.

With a hum, the baker was pulling out laminated sheets to wrap their orders in. "I see. I hope you two have a wonderful night, safe travels!"

Seconds later, the two of them were back to walking the streets again, each holding a small loaf of warm buttered cinnamon bread. They looked around for a place to sit until eventually, they found themselves back at the bank of the river just a few steps out of the village.

Both seemingly not minding the dirt, they sat side by side at the bank several steps from the rushing water.

George was the first one to unwrap his loaf, plucking a warm piece of it off before plopping it into his mouth. With a satisfied hum, he was leaning into Dream's personal space, dropping his head to his shoulder.

"*This* is so good."

"Yeah?"

He followed the brunette, unwrapping his own loaf and plucking a piece off it. Sure enough, it was *amazing*. It was warm— warm enough to make Dream melt as he pulled another piece off.

"Dream," George called awkwardly, still having yet to move.

"Hm?"

"You look so happy when you eat hot food," he comments, shrugging. "That's probably weird to say but, like, I always forget how *privileged* royals can be. You guys always end up getting the short end of the stick. It sucks."

"It sucks but there are worse things in life than cold food."

As the two of them begin finishing off their loaves, a thought picks away at his brain.

George already had him slipping—cracking at the seams. He'd basically revealed all of his secrets by now, would one more hurt?

Was it *selfish* that he wanted to hear his actual name slip from the prince's lips?

His mind slips back to earlier that day, back to something so simple George had said. *"Instead of the whole 'Prince George and his royal guard, Dream' thing, it'll just be us—the real us. We can pretend to be normal for one night."*

He dropped his loaf of bread into his lap, a shaky and exasperated sigh escaping him. He *wanted* to be normal.

As George cautiously picked his head up from his shoulder, he found himself finally caving.

Just one night, he'd let himself have this—*whatever this was*.

"Dream?" George called out cautiously, dropping his own loaf into his lap. "Are you okay?"

"Clay," he finds himself correcting—surprising himself.

When he turns to the latter, the brunette's eyes are white, his eyebrows turned upward. "What?"

Clearing his throat, he turns to look out toward the river. "My name, it's Clay."

Silence washes over them for a moment, a comfortable one at that. His nerves aren't pricking at him, which surprises him. Instead, he allows George to take in the new information, ignoring the way his heart pounds in protest against his ribs.

"Why—*why* are you telling me this?"

He shrugs, dipping his head down. He can't help the smile that tugs at his lips at his reply. "You said we could pretend to be normal, just for one night." This time as he lifts his head, he meets George's eyes, not feeling one ounce of regret. "Dream isn't the real me, it's just the persona of the person I wished I was. Just for one night, call me Clay, okay?"

The brunette stares up at him in pure *awe*.

"Clay."

The name rolls off his tongue slowly as if he's saying the name for the first time. He watches as a confident smile erupts over George's face, and suddenly, there's a hand being thrown into his face.

"It's nice to meet you, Clay."

The way he speaks his name is like an angel singing— it has his stomach-dropping, but in a *good* way.

He hopes that he always says his name like that.

There was something about the fresh atmosphere of Northwick that had Dream feeling like he was on cloud nine. The second he'd taken George's hand in a curt shake, it was like the night had shifted. Finally, the last reminiscence of sunlight disappeared behind the mountains, leaving them in the darkness of the stars and moon.

"It suits you," George said as he dropped his hand, "*Clay*. I like that name."

"More than Dream?" He questioned breathlessly.

With a hum and a tilt of his head, the latter shrugged. "Maybe, maybe not. We'll have to see."

Once both of their loaves had been finished, the two were returning to their feet, dusting off the damp mud from their pants and cloaks. Again, George took hold of his hand like it was second nature and tugged him back to the heart of the village.

After aimlessly walking about for some time, they came across their market square. It was nowhere as big as Gantrick's, but it sure was a lot neater and more open. More space was put between each open-air shop and there were even regular indoor shops as well. It was both quaint and welcoming.

"Let's buy the most random things." George laughs as he tugs him toward the open-air shops.

Stumbling over his own feet, he grabs onto George's shoulder with his other hand to balance himself out. "Would that not be a waste of money?"

"Who *cares*, let's just have some fun."

Apparently, George's definition of fun entails buying all the rocks and gems he comes across, because why the hell not? Dream, admittedly, finds it very enduring, but it wasn't like he'd say that out loud.

After hitting each shop they come across, their bags filled with an assortment of different gems, herbs, rocks, and a few knives that had caught Dream's attention that George insisted on buying, they were making their way through the village looking for a tavern.

"This is so weird walking around freely without anyone recognizing me," George had commented as they walked hand-in-hand.

"It's a nice feeling, isn't it?"

"Yeah," he'd replied solemnly, gripping Dream's hand a little tighter after that. "I wish it could just be normal at home, it's not even like I have big responsibilities yet. My parents were generous enough to not throw that much on my plate."

Part of Dream envied him for that, but he let the feelings pass. At least his parents cared about him. At least he didn't have a shitty bringing up.

"Maybe, someday things could be different."

A melancholy laugh left the latter. "Don't go around giving me more hope, *Clay*."

"I mean, you never know. Things are changing, times are changing. Some day, things may be different."

"Yeah, maybe when I'm all old and wrinkly."

"Ew." Dream scrunched his nose up, swinging their arms together. "Don't put it like that."

"What, you don't like imagining me all old and wrinkly?"

Turning his head, he eyed the brunette who was latched to his hand. He was a few paces behind him, practically speed walking to keep up with his pace. He purposely slowed down his strides until they stepped in place side-by-side.

"I doubt you'll get all wrinkly, you have nice skin," he complimented, hoping it didn't sound too weird.

"But what if I *do*, will you still like me?"

Taken back by the sudden question, he turned his attention back to the buildings around them.
"What's that even supposed to mean?"

"What do *you* want it to mean?" The brunette comes to a halt, tugging at his hand until he stops just a few paces in front of him. "You do like me, right?"

The question weighs heavy in the air.

"What? Of course, I do, we're friends, aren't we?"

His reply doesn't seem adequate enough when he feels George tugging at his arm with both hands, forcing him to turn and face him.

"That's not what I meant," he clarifies, his gaze hardening. "*I—nevermind.*"

"No, continue," Dream urges him, taking a step to close the space between them. "What *did* you mean?"

He's confused, and maybe he's getting his hopes too high, but as he watches George's gaze land somewhere else he swears he sees him blush.

"*I—I forgot what I was going to say.*" He stumbles carelessly over his words, so carelessly Dream can tell he's lying. He wants to prod him more, wants to understand where he was going with his previous statement, but he's cut off before he can. "Hey! Look, there's a tavern!"

The moment is broken as George drops his arm and makes his way to the tavern, an odd kick in his step. Dream is shocked for a moment, left to gape at himself as he stands alone on the gravel path they'd been walking.

You do like me, right?

George's words, so softly and tenderly spoken, rang in his ears.

You do like me, right?

Had he read the situation right after all? Had he been implying so desperately what he thought he'd been implying?

You do like me, right?

Was George seriously *flirting* with him?

He's broken from his moment as George swings open the tavern door a few feet ahead of him, waving him to follow. "C'mon, or I am getting something without you!"

Like he always did, he followed after George like a lost puppy, grabbing onto the door handle with a little too much energy. The second they step in, they're greeted with the sound of music and the smell of alcohol, a mixture that Dream didn't quite enjoy together. The place was packed with unfamiliar faces, and with just one look around, Dream realizes it's not only a tavern but a pub as well. There's a clearing in the main room where people stood dancing, body-to-body shamelessly as they swayed to the music.

Dream couldn't help but wonder what exactly he'd gotten himself into.

Sure enough, George is latching onto him again like it's the only thing he knows, practically *dragging* him further into the establishment. There's a heat in his cheeks as he pulls him to his side, an arm coming to rest at the small of his back.

"This place looks fun," he comments, turning down to the brunette beside him, "seems like you're type of joint."

"You're an idiot," George replies, shaking his head.

They stand there for no more than a minute, scouring for an open table when an unfamiliar face approaches them with a kind smile. He has brown fluffy hair, a royal purple trench coat thrown on, his hands buried in his pockets.

"Hey!" He greets bubbly, stepping towards the two of them. "Are— are you two just walking in?"

Dream takes in the appearance of the man before he's cautiously nodding. "Uh, yeah," he replies timidly.

"Cool, cool. Are you two new around here?"

"Yeah, we're just traveling, took a pit stop," Dream answers swiftly, "Who are you?"

"Oh— sorry! My name's Karl, Karl Jacobs!" He pulls a hand from his coat, extending it to him. "I saw you two walk in looking kind of lost and one of my friends suggested we invite you over to our table! Some of our friends bailed on us and he said you two looked interesting enough to fill their spots."

Dream was admittedly shocked by the forwardness, but then again, he'd lived a quite sheltered life growing up and kept to himself these days, so this was probably normal— right?

Cautiously, he takes Karl's hand. "Clay," he introduces himself before turning to George, who is just happily smiling at the newcomer.

"George," he introduces as well, waving a careful hand. "We'd love to sit with you guys."

Dream trusts his judgment, and sure enough, they're following Karl to a table in the middle of the joint. The table they stop at is filled with people— which takes him back by a bit. There's a woman who had her hair tied back and her lips tinted a bright red, a boy wearing a white cloak, a boy with a green and blue scarf, and another guy who wore a mask similar to Dream's.

"Okay, so, this is Corpse, Poki, James, and Sykkuno," he speedily introduced them to one another before turning promptly to them and whispering, "Corpse was the one who said you two looked interesting."

"I liked the matching cloaks," Corpse, the guy with the mask, commented, shrugging his shoulders innocently.

A moment later, they were ushered into their seats by Karl.

"My friend who's like the life of the party got caught up in some stupid business stuff, as usual, so hopefully you guys like to party."

With a roll of his eyes, Dream could barely compose himself.

"George can barely take a glass of wine, please don't think he's going to be the life of the party by any means."

Offended, the latter yanked at his cloak. "Oh, you're one to talk, you don't even drink."

"Well, that's very sad to hear, but I am sure I can drink enough for everyone here."

The table erupted into laughter as they easily fell into conversation, exchanging quick formalities before falling into a random discussion.

"I'm kind of glad Alex got side-tracked again, he always tries to sing when we go out to eat and it's so embarrassing," James said halfway through their conversation.

"Oh, you have to admit, you miss him too," Poki giggled as she tugged on James's side. "We haven't seen him in months, admit it, you *miss* him."

"All he'd be doing tonight is complaining about his awful supervisor. I think we dodged a bullet on that one."

Honestly, Dream felt a bit out of place amongst them—but he found he didn't mind all that much when he felt George nudge up against his side, giggling along with the rest of the crew they'd managed to slip into.

As minutes accumulated into an hour, Dream found himself nursing a plate of lukewarm food as George spoke excitedly to James, quiet bubbles of laughter leaving him every sentence. It felt nice to feel like a normal person for once, seated with a bunch of strangers that only saw them as two simple travelers.

When the majority of their table had finally finished their food, drinks untouched, Karl was pulling James and Corpse from the table excitedly. "Let's *dance!*" Before he pulled them from the table, he turned his head over his shoulder, facing Dream and George. "You two should join."

This time, Dream was the one standing, pulling George up from the table by his hands.

"Are you inviting me to a *dance?*"

"No, I'm thinking about throwing you out the front door, sorry."

With a quiet fit of giggles, the two were following after Karl's lead, toeing around the filled tables of the tavern.

"Do you even know how to dance?"

With a scrunched nose, Dream pushed at George's side. "Why do you think I am incapable of doing things."

"You're a guard, I've just taken it that you don't get out much."

An offended gasp left him. "I had a life before I became a guard, that's just rude."

As they slip onto the dance floor, a few couples away from Karl and his friends, Dream finds George looking up at him with a crooked smile.

"Never pinned you for a social person."

"I mean, I wouldn't really say I was a social person," he confesses, letting his hands slip from George's hands to his forearms, "I just learned to do a lot more than your normal run of the mill guard."

"Makes me interested in learning more about your past."

"Trust me, you don't want to learn more," he insists, pulling the brunette closer to him, "I'm a better person now than I was then."

As the music around them turned into something softer and the bodies around them swayed, George clutched to his arms a little harder.

"I doubt you were ever a bad person," he laughs, tilting his head upward.

"Yeah yeah, I'm sure your opinion would change." Solemnly, he pulls George in closer until he's wrapped in his arms comfortably.

As they began to sway to the hum of the music, the conversations around them dulling out into white noise, George just shook his head.

"I doubt there's anything you could have done to make you think you were ever a bad person."

Dream wants to believe that—he really does—but who would think that a *murderer* and a *traitor* would be anything but a bad guy?

Instead, a cheap chuckle leaves him. "I promise I'm not this great person you think I am. I'm just a filthy liar."

As they sway to the music around them, George doesn't bother to move from Dream's arms. Instead, he rests his forehead against his shoulder, taking a shaky breath.

"Well, if you're a filthy liar, I guess that makes me a damn traitor."

With twisted eyebrows, he comes to a halt, his arms tightening around the brunette.

"I know I ask this a lot, but what is that even supposed to mean?"

"Look where we are." George lifts his head, a tender smile plastered across his face. "This isn't my kingdom, is it? We all have our faults. God, I couldn't ever see you as some bad guy. I couldn't hate you, even if you were Satan himself."

The comment almost has Dream barreling to the ground.

"What, do you have a thing for devils or something?"

"Maybe. Something like that."

It's simple and easy to resolve to joking. It was better than facing his issues head-on, at least.

Seemingly, they drop the conversation and return to swaying to the music until it changes into something more upbeat. From what Dream could remember about classical music, it sounded like a waltz of some sort.

Sure enough, the group around them was moving, clumsily and uncoordinated along with the music in a poorly put-together waltz. It was nothing like what a castle's dance floor would look, but nevertheless, it was perfect in its own way. Perfect enough for Dream at least as he parted from George, bowing before him.

"You know how to waltz?"

The brunette erupted into laughter, covering his cheeks with his hands. "Oh, you really are an idiot, aren't you?"

Slipping into the dance was nothing but muscle memory, and George looked honest to God surprised. It was messy, and anything but perfect, but then again they were on the floor of a pub with a bunch of random people. It didn't have to be perfect if it was fun.

"So, Dream, when were you going to tell me you knew how to dance?"

The brunette pauses, cringing on himself for a second.

"*Clay*," he corrects himself. "Clay is a lot better, actually."

"Oh, yeah? You think so?"

"Mmm... I think so."

As they finish the final steps to their dance, rejoicing in one another's arms again as the music dips into something even slower, they're pressed together in the crowd as more very obviously drunk people slip beside them, laughing and giggling as they hang from one another.

Dream was sickeningly sober, or at least he thought so.

Something shifts in the room, something shifting between the two of them as well.

Suddenly, both of George's hands are sprawled against his chest and he feels intoxicated by the closeness. *So close*, he thinks, as George's forehead meets his shoulder again. *Too close*, as there's a brush of lips against his neck.

"*George*." He says his name like a warning, and yet, the latter doesn't budge. "*George*."

There's a moment of hesitation as he pulls back, pulling himself to his tippy-toes so that he's eye-to-eye with Dream.

"*Clay*," he calls out, so soft and warm it's enough to make him melt. "Tell me to stop."

"What?"

"I said, tell me to stop."

Dream feels suspended as George's hands move up from his chest to the side of his neck, the pads

of his fingers resting easily against the warm exposed skin. For a moment, he watches as the other's heterochromatic eyes flicker from his eyes to his lips in a slow drag. He knows where this is going in an instant, and somehow, he can't find it in himself to care. All of his common sense goes flying out the window as two warm hands capture his cheeks, thumbs pushing into his cheekbones bruisingly.

"Clay," he repeats again, dangerously. "Please tell me to stop."

He doesn't. For the first time, he doesn't listen to George's request. As their noses brushed together, a shallow breath escapes the brunette, the warmth hitting against Dream's upper lip. George tilted his head slightly, his eyes half-lidded. Dream stared intently into his eyes, waiting.

At that moment, he knew everything was about to change, and yet, feeling drunk off the close proximity, he couldn't bring himself to care.

A chaste second-lasting kiss was planted onto his lips. Just the slide of warm lips locking together before flinching away.

Admittedly, George almost looked frightened as he pulled away. His cheeks were rosy, skin flushed with candlelight.

It was like the kiss had never happened, the people around them still dancing and chattering away, not a single person's eyes on them.

Dream's eyes were latched onto George's face, watching as his eyes focused solely on his lips, glinting with mischief. It was a face he pulled all too familiarly that gave him the chills. The way his eyes crinkled at the sides, eyebrows dipping down, he was *concentrated*.

"Clay, I—"

The words die on his tongue as Dream surges forward, reconnecting their lips. There's a hum of shock as George melts into the kiss, his grip tightening on either side of his face.

The only way he could explain the kiss was that it was somewhere between needy and demanding. In that kiss was the sweetness of passion, a million loving thoughts condensed into a moment.

It had Dream scared as he pulled away, gasping for air.

"I'm sorry—" He rasped out, his jaw dropping. "Fuck—I—"

This time, George is the one cutting him off as he brings his hands to Dream's cloak and pulls him down *hard*. Their lips crashed together again messily, and yet, so perfect at the same time. The kiss was *desperate*—and yet, he found no shame in it.

He found no shame in the way he felt completely intoxicated, enveloped in George's arms as he kissed him like it was the last thing he'd ever do.

Thankfully, the crowd around them paid no mind, but even if they did, Dream most certainly wouldn't have minded with the way he felt like he was on cloud fucking nine.

Birthday Celebration

Chapter Summary

"Sure, why not." Dream held his hand out to George, but was pleasantly surprised when George ignored his open palm and brought the candy to his face.

"Oh, romantic." The two giggled happily as Dream allowed the prince to drop the sweet candy into his mouth.

With a determined expression, George reached out for another candy, but their moment was broken as the clicking of heels in the hallway grabbed their attention.

The party was just beginning.

After five years of working so *diligently* to create the walls of a well-crafted persona—time and time again returning to the brink of crumbling only to solidify himself—building up his walls brick by brick with lies to keep himself safe, he was finally allowing himself to be torn apart. Bit by bit—*brick by brick*—George was tearing down his walls.

If he had to be honest, Dream liked the way George's hands felt against his skin, even when they were tearing him apart until only his core was left. He liked the way the pads of his fingers would drag him back in for another greedy kiss, feeling both warm and comforting. He liked the way they slipped from his cheeks to his chest, resting against his heart for just a moment before they traced his arms, only to capture his hands softly. He liked the way his thumbs traced the veins on the backs of his hands lightly, pressing circles into them.

In his touch, he felt safe, even as he crumbled.

There was raw emotion in the way George's fingers curled around his as their lips parted. Something telling him that even as they parted, he still wanted him. Dream hoped that the brunette knew the feeling was mutual as he tightened his grip around his hands, squeezing them gently.

With half-opened eyes, Dream snuck a guilty peek at the boy in front of him—the boy whose lips were parted as a heavy breath escaped him—the boy whose pupils were blown as he stared back at him in awe—the boy he'd just *kissed*—the boy who was leaning in once more, but not to capture his lips.

With a heavy thud, George's forehead fell to his shoulder.

"I never want to go back to Gantrick," he'd whispered into his collarbone, "not if being here means I get to have you."

There was a pause as Dream's brain processed the words spoken to him. With wide eyes and stiffened shoulders, he glanced down to the boy situated between his arms, wondering if this had all just been a figment of his imagination. While the warmth that radiated off of George felt destabilizing, it was inviting nevertheless—inviting him to the real world, reminding him that this was all real.

George had kissed him. George *wanted* him the way he'd wanted him.

It was all too dangerous, and yet, it was so exhilarating at the same time.

"You can have me, wherever, as long as I can have you in return," he replied, an exasperated breath leaving him as he did. The bold approach he had surprised him, but then again, there was no one who made him feel like *this*. George was someone incredibly different from everyone else and he loved that. "I think I've liked you way longer than I'd like to admit I have."

Love made you do stupid things, didn't it?

A nervous chuckle left the brunette as he stepped closer, slotting his feet against Dream's.

With a not so smart tongue, George was responding with, "I can't even think straight around you. Your goddamn presence is like— *intoxicating*."

With a quiet eruption of giggles, George lifted his head.

"*Intoxicating*, huh?" The blond grinned as warmth blossomed across his cheeks. "You think I'm *intoxicating*?"

This time, the latter groaned but didn't reply as he dipped his head to the ground.

Now that he was feeling a bit more with it, Dream found himself shivering. "You know this is dangerous grounds to tread on, right?" His tone held no malice, and yet, as he watched George's face drop, he knew he'd said the wrong thing.

"If I'm reading something wrong then I—"

"You're not," he quickly cut him off, holding his hands a little tighter. "You're not reading anything wrong, I promise you. I just, I mean... *George*, I'm your *guard*, aren't these dangerous lines to cross?"

With a bewildered expression, George pulled at his hands, bringing them up to his chest. "Titles mean nothing to me, Clay. They're just *titles* at the end of the day. Titles mean nothing without the person. It's the person you are that matters to me. If anyone else has a problem with that then they can be damned," he whispered just loud enough for him to hear, a certain desperation in his tone that made Dream feel hollow.

With a shaky breath, Clay was taking a step back. "What if I'm not the person you think I am?"

"Whoever you were in your past doesn't matter anymore," George urged him, swinging their hands in emphasis, "I like the person you are *now*."

"But— you said no more lies— and I promise you, if I don't tell you about my past, I'd be lying big time to you," Dream spoke, hurriedly and shakily under his breath as he tried to mind the crowd around them.

"Is... is your past really *that* bad?"

"Yeah," he replied, his voice shaky, "it is that bad."

His eyes flickered about the crowd around them before he was staring back up at Dream with more desperation. "I'm not going to stand here and make you spill your story to me, I'll never do that. If you want to talk about it someday, then we can, but I meant it when I said I wouldn't care even if you were Satan himself. I want to just live in the present, with you."

The heat in his eyes had Dream wanting to barrel to the floor.

"I really like you, Clay," he spoke shakily, "I think I have ever since that day you fell asleep in the goddamn garden. There hasn't been a day where I don't feel guilty for what I did and I—"

Heat rose from Dream's stomach to his chest.

"You *just* said you want to live in the present, didn't you? I don't hold anything against you, I never could."

A cheesy grin grew on George's face after that.

"Okay," he said as he tugged at Dream's hands, pulling him off the crowded dance floor, "then let's live in the present, just you and I."

The rest of their nights goes off without a hitch. Dream doesn't know how they pull it off, but they do. They spend their last hours in Northwick lingering in that damned tavern, acting as if nothing had really changed as they surrounded themselves with strangers, laughing as if it had always been that way. George, having submitted to James's pleas, did have one drink, but it was just enough to leave a tinge of red stained on his cheeks.

The night couldn't have been better, Dream decided.

As the tavern began emptying itself, only a crowd of wasted people left, Dream found himself pulling George from his seat with care.

"Hey, we really should get going," Dream said as he checked out the tavern window, only to be met with the midnight stars. "It was a pleasure to meet you all but we have a *long* day tomorrow."

"Awe, it was a pleasure meeting you, Clay! You too, George!" Karl ecstatically spoke, standing from his seat. "Maybe we can meet again someday? Are you guys traveling far?"

"No, not really, we're just going to the village over," he answered, pushing in his chair.

"Sweet! Please visit us again; we'd love to see you guys again."

The table gave them a collective nod, bidding them farewell and safe travels. With a heavy heart, Dream found himself slipping his hand into George's as they walked the dark and quiet streets of Northwick.

"So," he started, clearing his throat, "was this everything you expected it to be?"

With a hum of delight, George took a step closer to him, brushing their shoulders together as they walked. "Yes, and then some," he answered, his voice laced with a quiet giggle. "I wish I could do stuff like this more often."

Rolling his eyes, Dream sighed. "Yeah, you and me both."

"Karl and all of them seem like such a happy and carefree bunch. I bet if I was born as a civilian I could be that way too."

In the shelter of the night, Dream peered beside him, tracing George's profile in the moonlight.

"I think about that all the time, you know. Like, if I could live a normal life, what would have been different?" Sucking in his bottom lip, Dream turned away from George. "I like to think in another life, I'd be living in some stupid village with Sapnap as my housemate or something. I bet Skeppy

would live beside us and steal our food every night."

He paused, turning his head to the sky. "I feel like Bad would be Skeppy's housemate. They seem close enough. Imagine we all lived in a village like this? I bet everyone would get along with Karl, especially Sapnap. Now *that* would be a fun life."

Dream could feel George's shoulders shake against his. "Oh, yeah? Where would I be in this other life?"

A wheeze left him. "You'd live here with all of us, of course. You'd probably be the village's heartthrob. I bet every woman would be throwing themselves at you."

"Would you be in those masses?"

"Oh, definitely not," Dream spoke with pride, "I wouldn't stoop that low. I'd actually try to win your heart. Maybe I'd bring you flowers and ask you to accompany me to the pub. I'd find a way to make some big romantic gesture that would sweep you off your feet— maybe I'd take you on some romantic ride on horseback at night, then we could watch the sunrise together. Sounds like a perfect time to confess my feelings, huh?"

"Oh, yeah?" George giggled. "I'd probably like that."

"Of course you would, *princess*."

With a groan, George bumped his shoulder into Dream's with enough force to cause the both of them to falter in their steps.

"You think we'd live happily there?"

With a pause, they were nearing the entrance of the village where they'd tied Ember up just hours before. Selfishly, Dream didn't want this night to end.

"I'd like to think so," he murmured under his breath, turning to meet George's eyes. "Who's to say we can't be happy in this lifetime, too?"

With a quirked eyebrow, George teetered back away from him. "You're so cheesy, aren't you?"

"What can I say? You've had an effect on me."

Just like that, they're making their way to Ember. Parting in silence, George pulls his way onto Ember's back as Dream carefully unties her reins all while patting the side of her face gently. Dream passes the reins off to George as he pulls himself up behind him, settling against him before taking custody of the reins once more.

"Are you ready to return to Gantrick?" Dream finds himself asking as he signals Ember to start moving.

As if it's an answer, George sighs, collapsing against his chest. "Not really," he answers truthfully, "at least it was nice to have one night without everyone's eyes on me. It felt nice— being free to do whatever."

"I get it," Dream hums.

His heart stutters in his chest as he holds Ember's reigns with one hand again, the other dropping onto George's thigh.

"Is— is this okay?"

There's a small hum of approval as George leans into his touch.

Dream wonders if the whole event had just been a dream or not. There was no way that the night had been real. There was no way that they'd successfully left Gantrick without anyone realizing. There was no way that George actually felt the same for him— no way they'd *kissed*.

He felt so high off dopamine that Dream just couldn't piece it all together, even as the two of them ran through the castle's garden's to George's window. Even as George collapsed against his side, laughing and running a hand through his hair, Dream couldn't believe it.

He'd let himself crumble in George's clutches— and he didn't even care. For once, he didn't care about the repercussions that his actions could have brought, not with how the brunette was currently staring at him— not with how warm he felt pressed against his side.

"You should get to bed so you can at least be a little prepared for tomorrow," Dream urged as he shook his shoulders, pushing the prince off him clumsily.

Stiffening, George straightened himself out, staring at the window as if it were going to kill him.

"Are you going to leave?"

"I— I need to return to the guard's quarters," Dream replied, stumbling over his words, "it's late."

Without another word, George marched up to the window and threw it open.

"You should come up with me, just for a few minutes," he suggested as he began pulling himself through the window.

With wide eyes, Dream shook his head. "It's late, the sun will be rising in just a few hours, George —"

"Just for a little bit." With pleading eyes, George leaned against the window. "Please let this night last a little longer."

"I don't know—"

"You left your armor up here, anyway," George informed him cockily, "you *may* need that."

Defeatedly, Dream dropped his shoulders, unknowing they'd been stiffened. "Fine, just for a minute."

With an exasperated sigh, he followed after the prince, pulling himself through the window. With a knowing smirk, George started his way up the dark stairs like it was nothing. Dream closed the window behind him and followed the brunette up the stairs, keeping a careful hand against the wall in the dark as he uneasily toed at the stairs.

"How can you see anything?"

"It's a guessing game!" George called back from the top of the staircase as he pushed open his door.

The second he stepped into George's bedroom, his eyes readjusted to the light from the moon that spilled into the room. Before him, the prince shrugged off his cloak, dropping it to the bed in a fluid motion as he turned his back to him. "You left your stuff over there," he spoke as he sat on the

edge of his bed, his hand pointing toward the corner of his room.

The sadness that laced his tone didn't go unnoticed by Dream.

With a hum, Dream walked up to George's bed, resting a hand carefully onto George's shoulder, as if he was seeking his body warmth again. The prince jumped at the contact for a moment, his head turning up immediately.

"What?"

Blinking rapidly, Dream looked down at him.

"I—I just want to say goodnight," he found himself replying uneasily, unsure why he'd made his way to George in the first place. With a shaky hand, he pushed George's bangs away slowly, bringing his lips delicately to his forehead. The room spun for a moment as the smell of lavender greeted him and he couldn't help but sigh.

Before he could pull away, George wrapped his hands around his middle, pulling him down to the bed beside him. Against his cloak, his fingers traced down his spine slowly as he tucked his head under Dream's chin.

"I know I've already asked before," George started, his voice muffled by Dream's cloak, "but will you stay the night?"

Dream stiffened in George's arms. "You—you are so absurd," he murmured, his eyes trained on the wall on the other side of the room. "You remembered asking me to stay last night?"

"Of course I did," George chuckled, the warmth of his breath pressing against his neck. "I also remember being very disappointed when you said no."

Warmth engulfed Dream's cheeks.

"You understand what you're—"

"I don't mean it like that, you foolish freak," George sighed, pressing his palm into Dream's back with force. At the action, Dream's nerves calmed, like an ocean after a storm. "It's just nice being in your presence—it's calming—you don't have to stay if you don't want to, but I figured I'd try again."

With a heavy sigh, Dream closed his eyes, dropping his head onto George's. "If you want me to stay, I will."

There's a beat of silence before George is laughing.

"Really, that easy?"

"What?" Dream picked his head up. "You sound so sad I just—"

"I was kidding, *Clay*." Reluctantly, George picked his head up. "Kick your shoes off."

"Why should I?" Dream laughed, leaning back from George, still trapped by his arms wrapped around his back.

"Because I'm asking you to?"

Rolling his eyes, Dream complied with his request, both of their shoes falling to the ground with

small thuds. Before Dream could say another word, George's gaze was lowered to his mouth and he could feel his lips part wordlessly.

There was a moment of hesitation as Dream dropped his hands against George's chest.

"What? Why are you looking at me like that?"

George's answer came in the form of lips pressed against lips. The moment George's mouth was against his, he stopped breathing.

The brunette's hands slipped from his back to his chest, fingers working away at untying his cloak as their kiss deepened. Dream couldn't help but shivered as George pulled away, pulling his cloak off simultaneously.

"Sorry," he muttered, "that was in the way."

There was a brief moment where Dream wanted to ask what he meant by that, but he didn't. George was looking at him like his life depended on it, and it was like nothing else he'd seen from the other before. Hands were pressed against his slightly exposed collarbone, pushing him back onto the bed with desperation.

The moment his head hit the bed, George followed after him, reconnecting their lips easily. Following his lead, Dream reached up with a sigh, wrapping his hands protectively against the other's hips.

It was messy—nowhere near as soft and calculated like they had kissed when they were in the tavern. Lips meeting halfway for mere seconds before pulling away, only to chase after each other again.

The adrenaline rush that Dream felt left him shaking under George's hands as they moved from his collarbone to either side of his neck, his thumbs pressing against his jaw.

Their kisses held a certain heat to them—a heat Dream wasn't ready to explore yet.

When they finally pulled away, Dream found himself gasping, his eyes flying open. George's half-closed eyes were now wide open, an alarming curiosity washing over his features as he pulled back.

Dream was stunned at the enticing flavor of the foreign lips he found himself longing for. He was tempted to give in to them again—tempted to grab George by the cheeks and pull him down again to reconnect their lips—tempted to continue what they started—but he had some self-control.

A very small amount of self-control, that is.

Pulling his hands from George, the prince was rolling off him, dropping onto the bed beside him with a sigh.

"Sorry," he'd hummed under his breath. "Got too carried away."

A sad chuckle left Dream's lips. "It's fine, don't worry," he'd replied, his voice hoarse, his throat dry.

In the quiet of the night, flushed in the moonlight, Dream stared up at the top of George's bed, detached from himself.

"George," he called out, his bottom lip quivering, "what— where do we go from here?"

"I don't know," the latter answered, "as long as you're here with me, we'll figure it out. We've got time."

Blindlessly, Dream reached out across the sheets, feeling for George's hand. When their fingertips brushed together, Dream grabbed onto his hand, squeezing it in the dark.

"Yeah," he laughed, his eyes shutting, "we've got time."

Waking up and being wrapped in enough warmth to suffocate him was not something Dream had expected. He also did not expect to feel genuinely well-rested. Normally, his bones would ache and tingle, feeling sore from sleeping on such a hard cot seeing as the guard's beds weren't made of the best material.

When he cracked his eyes open he was greeted with the peacefully relaxed face of George, whose head laid against his shoulder, the warmth of his breath hitting against his neck.

Looking around him, he realized that the first few buttons of his shirt had been undone. George's hand was sprawled against his bare chest, his fingertips resting at the edge of his collarbones. Wrapped around both of their midsections were the heavy silk sheets of George's bed which made Dream feel like he was being melted in lava.

With a staggering breath, Dream realized that all of his limbs felt electrified at once.

When was the last time he even found himself cuddled up to someone, let alone like *this*?

The last time he could even remember cuddling with someone, it had been seven years ago, the night before his sister was sent away to some boarding school for princesses to learn how to become a more 'proper women of society.' She was just ten at the time when she'd snuck into his bedroom, crying to heart out about how their parents hated her.

He, merely fifteen at the time, held her close as she sobbed until she inevitably passed out, sprawled across his chest and half his bed.

When was the last time he even saw Drista? Was it that night?

With a quiet groan, Dream lifted his head, looking out the glass balcony doors across him. The sun was just peeking up over the horizon now, signifying the dawn of a new day.

Looking back down to his chest, he engraved the last peaceful seconds of George sprawled against him to memory before he closed his eyes and brought a hand to his shoulder.

"Hey, princess," he murmured in a soft tone, shaking him lightly. "I got to go."

With a quiet groan, George pulled himself closer to Dream, tucking his face into his neck with a whine.

"I'm sorry, I have to go," Dream sighed, shaking his shoulder once more. "You'll see me again in a few hours."

"Just a few more seconds," George mumbled against his neck, his voice gravelly, laced with sleep.

Dream cracked his eyes open, staring down at the prince wrapped up against his side. Rolling his eyes, he brought a hand to his hair and ruffled it, causing the prince to squirm away from his touch.

"A few more seconds will turn into a few more minutes, and then a few more minutes will turn into a few more hours," Dream pointed out with a tired laugh. "I'll be back before you know it, *birthday boy*." George just laughed against his skin, his hand wrapping around his shirt as he mumbled a quiet 'happy birthday' against his temple.

Part of Dream still couldn't believe that this was real—was he not denying his feelings for the prince just days ago? Look at him now—wrapped in the prince's sheets like he belonged there, said prince himself sprawled against him shamelessly.

Shouldn't he be scared of the consequences this could bring? He knew he should have, but truly, he was hard to think of any negative thoughts when he felt so *happy*.

Slowly, George unwrapped himself from his side, rolling onto his back beside him. "I'll accompany Ranboo later to pick you and Sapnap up," he grumbled as he dropped an arm across his eyes, "I'll see you soon."

With an almost saddened smile, Dream pulled himself from George's sheets, pulling them back over the prince before he made his way across the room to where his armor sat in a messy heap.

"Any idea when we need to start getting ready?" He questioned as he blindly pulled his armor on.

George didn't answer for a moment. "I think after breakfast. They like everything being ready hours in advance," he replied before tossing to lay face forward in his bed.

A small breath of laughter escaped the blond as he searched the floor for his discarded cloak. When he found it at the edge of George's bed with his shoes, he could help the immense smile that took over his face.

"I'll see you soon, princess!"

A quiet groan was all he got in reply.

The second he walks back into his bedroom, freshly bathed with his armor tucked under his arm, Sapnap is standing from his bed with bloodshot eyes. He stops in his tracks at the sight, his jaw-dropping.

"Oh my God," the other manages to get out before he's right in front of him, pulling him into a messy hug. The armor he'd been holding dropped to the floor in a messy heap as Dream hugged his friend back without hesitation.

"What's wrong? Did something happen?" He questions into Sapnap's shoulder.

In his arms, the guard shakes like a leaf. "I thought something happened when you didn't return last night—I was up all night waiting for you—I couldn't—I..."

With blown pupils, Dream was hugging his friend tighter. "Calm down, calm down, slow deep breaths," he murmured to him, rubbing circles into his back. "I'm okay, I'm right here. We're okay," he reassures him, dropping his chin onto Sapnap's shoulder.

A moment passes before Sapnap's arms tighten around him.

"I couldn't decide if I was witnessing another Gwent fiasco or if you guys had been assassinated—I was so fucking scared—it would have been all my fault—"

Dream pulls away from the hug with his breath caught in his throat.

"You *knew* that was us, and you still let us go?" He questions frantically and demandingly.

With a fire in his eyes, Sapnap was standing back, raising his hands in front of him. "I told you Dream—I trust you! I know you wouldn't go around and do something stupid when you're totally capable of taking care of yourself! I knew George would be safe with you, and I expected you guys to return quickly—not the next day!"

Sapnap was still shaking as he turned away from him, both hands rising to his face as he dipped his head back.

"God, you had me so worried. That's not fair," Sapnap fussed into his hands, dropping onto Skeppy's bed. "Don't do that shit to me again. I'm not stupid, I could obviously tell it was you two!"

Dream stands there frozen in place as he watched Sapnap recollect himself. The moment he finds that his friend is breathing normally, his shoulders dropping, he clears his throat.

"We did return last night, we were only gone for a few hours," he informs him, his eyes blinking fast, "we visited the village over. He said—he said he wanted to get out for his birthday, he wanted to feel some freedom, so I let him."

Scoffing, Sapnap shakes his head. "Of course you did, you're so whipped for him."

"Was it really that obvious?"

All jokes are off the table in an instant as Sapnap lifts his head, their eyes meeting.

"Where did you stay last night?" He questions in a monotone and cold voice, his hands dropping to Skeppy's bed loosely.

With warm cheeks, Dream looked down to the ground. "George asked me to stay the night, so I did."

A breath of relief leaves Sapnap, and then a quiet bubble of laughter. "He asked you to stay the night twice in a row? Damn, I guess he *really* likes you," he joked, shaking his head.

"I guess you could say that..."

As he bent down to collect his armor, Sapnap was standing again. "Wait, what?" Before he could gather the last piece of his armor, Sapnap was bending down in front of him, snatching it from his hand. "Am I missing something here? Are—don't tell me you guys are like—a *thing*."

Dream meets Sapnap's eyes with all seriousness.

"I don't know what he wants to call it—but I think it's something," he replies, pulling the armor piece from Sapnap.

With a low whistle, Sapnap backs off him. "Okay, I see you, I see you."

"Oh, don't be weird."

"I'm not! I'm happy for you, idiot!" Sapnap drops back to Skeppy's bed, laying down this time. "I think we all knew something would happen eventually. Are you gonna tell me the juicy details? I mean you don't have to, but I would *love* to hear what happened."

Dream can't miss the way his friend wiggles his eyebrows as he crosses the room. "You're so fucking weird, go make up a scenario or something. It'll fit probably."

"Oh," Sapnap coos, "are you saying you guys—"

"No," Dream warns, "don't finish that."

"But you said—"

"I did *not* say that *that* happened."

"You implied it—"

"Where did I imply that? Tell me, I'd love to be enlightened—"

Their bickering is cut short when there's a quiet knock on the doorframe. Both of them crane their necks to the door, cheeks red as they catch Wilbur's eyes on them.

"Sorry to cut you boys short, but Ranboo and Prince George are here to collect you two," Wilbur speaks, pointing to the door behind him, "I'd suggest you guys get going like, now. Ranboo looks ready to explode and his highness looks ready to snap his neck off."

"Oh God, Ranboo is here?" Sapnap groans. "He scares me."

"Get over it, at least he's young, a teen like you. He's trying his best. The other royal advisors are *much* worse."

Both hesitating, Sapnap and Dream make it out of the guard's quarters, only to be met with George standing rather still outside with Ranboo pacing the path around him.

"There's so much to get done, so much last second things that need to be done—"

"*Ranboo*, we will be fine."

"Oh God, then the guests will start coming in just a few hours— do you think everything is ready — what if something goes wrong— what if the room catches on fire."

A look of disgust flashes over George's face before his eyes land on the two, a smile finally breaking across his face as his eyes land on Dream.

"Finally, you two are here!" George makes his way to Dream's side, his eyes turning to Ranboo as he gets up to his tippy toes to whisper in Dream's ear, "please, he's already driving me crazy. He almost started crying when he said I looked *tired*."

Dream doesn't get to reply, instead, Ranboo is already in his face, grabbing both of his hands.

"Dream! Thank you so much for taking care of his highness! If he was still sick for today, God, I do not know what we would have done!"

From his side, he can hear Sapnap scoff, "sick?"

"It truly was no problem, Ranboo," Dream lies anyway, patting his hands gently. "We should probably get going, yeah?"

Dropping his hands, Ranboo turns abruptly on his heel. "Right you are! Let's get a move on, c'mon, c'mon!"

Dream's already ready to combust and the party hasn't even started yet. The moment they'd entered the castle again, the three of them were ushered into some room Dream had never been in before. There were at least twelve windows and the light in there was so blinding that it hurt his eyes.

He and George stood in the middle of the room, both Ranboo and Sapnap's eyes on them carefully.

"Oh, you two are going to look lovely tonight," Ranboo started, pulling his clipboard to his face, "the tailors and makeup artists should be here any minute!"

"Makeup artists?" Dream parroted, chuckling when he felt George elbow his ribcage.

"Yes, why of course! Everyone needs a little touch up here and there to add some bedazzle." Ranboo drops the clipboard from his face, giving him an expression that makes him feel like he should have known that. "Have you never worn makeup, Dream?"

"No, I have," he replies, furrowing his eyebrows, "it just slipped my mind I guess."

With a sigh, Ranboo shook his head and turned his attention to Sapnap animatedly.

The second his eyes were off them, George was dropping his head against his shoulder. "Does Sapnap know?"

"He knows we left. He knew the whole time," Dream answers back in a whisper, "I should have known, he and I definitely locked eyes right before we left."

"I should have assumed so," George scoffs, lifting his head, "he didn't look too surprised or impressed when Ranboo mentioned me being sick yesterday."

"Sapnap's definitely not dumb, I can say that."

Behind them, he could hear the doors open and people shuffle into the room, but he paid them no mind.

"Does he know about the uh—the other thing?" George questioned, turning his eyebrows down.

Dream shook his head. "I mean, he said he assumed something was going on but I didn't *really* solidify anything."

"Ah, okay." The prince pauses, his gaze dropping to the floor. "Do—do you want to talk more about it—about us, that is, after the party?"

A smile grew on Dream's face at the thought. "Yeah, of course."

Beside him, a grin grows on the prince's face, but their quiet moment is broken as George's tailor taps his shoulder, giving him a curt apology as he pulls him away from Dream's side. With a sigh of his own, Dream turned around and met eyes with his tailor—a very familiar tailor, at that.

"Oh, Dream!" Christine gasped. "What a pleasure to see you again. Looks like I'll be helping you out today!"

Dream bit back a groan as he faked a smile. "Christine," he greeted painfully, "it's so *nice* to see you again."

Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Sapnap press the back of his hand to his mouth as his eyes landed on something behind him.

"I missed you after the party! I tried finding you again, but I just couldn't," she sighs sadly, "but anyway! I am truly glad to see you once more, I can't wait to make you look handsome tonight!"

Dream *does* plan on replying, but his thoughts are cut off when George clears his throat behind him.

"I think he looks handsome as is."

Everyone in the room stiffens at the comment.

"Oh, no, I agree! I just meant, you know, make sure he looked his finest tonight!" Christine corrects, waving her hands as she looks over Dream's shoulder to the prince. "I'm so sorry, your highness, if I gave you the wrong idea!"

Suddenly, there's a hand resting against his shoulder and George is standing at his side.

"Nothing to be sorry for, I was just stating my opinion," George speaks, something dark lacing his tone, causing Dream's stomach to do somersaults. "Just wouldn't want *Dream* over here getting the wrong idea, thinking he isn't already handsome."

As quick as the touch had come, George was leaving his side, talking to his own tailor as he left Dream in Christine's present.

As awkward as that moment was, Christine didn't try speaking to Dream again the rest of the time she stayed in the room at least, and for that, he is grateful to George.

It isn't until hours later, having been touched by foreign hands quite literally everywhere, that Dream finds himself standing stiffly in front of an elongated mirror, tilting his head carefully so he could watch his cheeks shimmer with whatever weird powder Christine insisted be put onto his face.

His outfit was nice, but simple all the same. His placid green shirt clung to his body tightly, loosening around his wrists in ruffles. A pair of dark corduroy pants accompanied the shirt, a pair of suspenders pulled over his shoulders proudly. He can't say he remembers the last time he wore something so dressy, but despite that fact, he smiles.

That smile only grows when he catches George dipping into the mirror's view behind him, the prince craning his neck backward to look at him. "You look good," he comments, dropping himself at his side.

Now with him so close, Dream admires his outfit. It's painfully similar to the outfit he'd worn when they had first met but a month ago, but nevertheless, Dream takes in the view all the same. He's wearing a baby blue shirt that hangs loosely around his arms, a dark brown sleeveless tunic and a royal blue cape draped across his shoulders. In a fleeting moment of weakness, he looks down to George's hand just inches away from his. A sparkling golden ring sits prettily on his index finger, begging for him to reach out and touch it.

"Thank you, *your highness*," Dream replies, careful to make sure he uses the formality, especially in front of Ranboo. He lets his eyes cascade down the prince's body one last time before he flicks them back up, only to meet George's eyes in the mirror. "You don't look too bad yourself."

In a knowing manner, George raises his eyebrows. "Awe, don't flatter me," he gushed jokingly, rolling his eyes as he turned from the mirror.

Dream followed his lead, turning to the crowd in the room.

"Why, don't you two just look marvelous!" Ranboo marveled as he clapped his hands together. "At least now, it looks like you fit at his side, Dream!"

"Ranboo—"

"Thank you," Dream responds in spite of himself, rudely cutting off George in the process. "I'm sure his highness appreciates the sentiment as well."

At his side, George just sighed defeatedly. "There is no sentiment to be appreciated," he bickered, "you look the same."

"On the contrary, your highness! It's very nice to see him without his mask on! It makes the outfit look all the more flattering!"

Behind Ranboo, Dream can't miss the way Sapnap chuckles into the back of his palm, his eyes turning upward as if his attention laid elsewhere.

"Well, now that you two look more than ready, it is time to make our way to the ballroom! The cooks should be finishing setting the tables by now."

The walk out of the room is awkward. Both Christine and George's tailor bid them awkward goodbye waves, refusing to say a word as Ranboo began on another tangent. Normally, Dream really did try to pay attention to what he was saying, but he found it incredibly hard to when George stepped to his side, their arms brushing together with each step.

"I'm kind of nervous," George whispered to him as they faltered a few steps behind Ranboo and Sapnap. There was a moment of hesitation before Dream felt George's pinky poke at his palm, hesitantly dragging down the smooth surface before wrapping their pinkies together. Dream's heart swelled at the action. "I should be used to this stuff by now, but I never really am."

"George, being nervous?" A small huff of a laugh escaped him. "You don't strike me as the nervous type."

"Being nervous is part of human nature, what the hell do you mean by that?"

"Maybe you're not human," Dream countered, "you certainly look like an angel to me."

The comment slips from his lips with ease, as if it were second nature. He hates how simple it feels to just say something like that—especially to *George* of all people. God, their confessions had been less than twenty-four hours ago, and here he was—being selfish as always. Taking too much—going too far—

"That was the compliment I was hoping to receive earlier," George giggles, pulling him from his spiraling thoughts.

"Oh, of course it was, *princess*."

"Have I ever told you, I think green's your color?"

Clay opens his eyes, catching another set of eyes blinking down at him owlishly. He's taken back by how close Fundy has gotten, a small gasp leaving his lips as he pushes himself into his bed a little further.

"No. But let me guess, it has to do with my eyes, right?"

"I mean—that too," Fundy stumbled over his words, leaning back a bit, "do you know what the color green represents, Clay?"

Green, a color that wielded a double-edged meaning to it.

"No," he replies rather flatly, "but I have a feeling you're about to inform me."

"Greens a calming color—it's actually considered the color of life because it stands for renewal and freshness. There's a handful of other meanings to it too, but when I think about the color and I think about you, I think about safety and youth."

With a huff, seventeen-year-old Clay rolled his eyes. "Doesn't green also represents the wild and untamed danger of nature?"

"I thought you said you didn't know what green represented," Fundy sighs sorrowfully, half closing his eyes as he stared down at Clay.

"Well, I lied. I was hoping you weren't comparing me to some wild threat."

Blinking down surprisingly at him, Fundy raised an eyebrow. "Would it be so bad if you were wild and dangerous?"

"Very," Clay warned, propping himself up on his elbows, "don't be ridiculous now."

Fundy doesn't move back—instead, he holds his ground, his eyes flickering over Clay's features carefully. "I wasn't trying to be," the guard replies, "I was actually going to say that I thought green was your color because I've always felt like you stood as a symbol for renewal for our kingdom, like you'd be our saving grace—"

"I think that's even more foolish."

Enticed by his words, Fundy leans in closer, his eyes dropping to Clay's lips. "Really—do you—"

Fundy never got to finish his sentence when Clay pushed him away. "Stop," he gritted out with seriousness. He swung his legs out from his bed, pushing himself to the edge of his mattress. "Never say that greens my color again. Don't say I'm some symbol for 'renewal' either."

"Why? You know, everyone here thinks—"

"I don't care what everyone thinks!" Clay yelled, throwing his hands into the air with exasperation. "I was never meant to be someone who saved people. The moment I become this kingdom's ruler, I'll drive them into the ground. It will be the opposite of some renewal, don't you understand?"

With tears welling in his eyes, Clay whipped his head toward Fundy.

"I was only put on this Earth to create destruction."

Dream's impressed with the looks of Gantrick's main ballroom. Surely, all the work that had been put into preparations the past month went to good use. He assumes the prince at his side feels the same way when he hears him gasp, "oh, wow. This is beautiful."

"It truly is, your highness! Oh, they have done such a wonderful job preparing everything!" Ranboo gushed happily, taking large strides into the room with extended arms.

The room was filled with servants carrying large trays over their shoulders, each of whom paused

mid-way through their tasks to give a simple bow in George's presence.

Around them, the room was illuminated in a soft golden hue. The chandeliers above them hung with pride as tassels of gold fell from them. The windows had been sealed off with royal blue drapes, giving the room more of a sophisticated vibe. The tables, set with golden and white mats, were pushed off to the side of the ballroom, leaving the middle of the room completely open. Large tables were pushed against the pillars supporting the room, filled with arrays of different candies, foods, and drinks.

It was a sight to see for sure—a sight fit for a prince.

"I don't think I've seen so much food in one place ever," Sapnap whispered from behind him, their shoulders barely brushing.

"As if the dinner party didn't look much like this," George joked from Dream's other side.

"To think this room will be filled with royals from all kingdoms about in just mere hours!" Ranboo clapped his hands excitedly. "It will be a sight to see, then! A party they will talk about for the ages!"

Exasperated, George tore away from Dream's side, making it over to Ranboo. Delicately, he placed a hand on the advisor's shoulder. "You always say this. The party will be wonderful as always, but remember, it's just a birthday party."

"A birthday ball, your highness!"

"And the difference?" George pulled away from Ranboo. "Why don't you check and see if everything's finished with the catering."

The advisor listened happily, leaving the ballroom with a bounce to his step. The moment he'd vanished out the lavished doors, the trio deflated.

"I promise he can be more calm and collected than this," George reassures, bringing a hand to his temples, "he just gets like this when he's excited. It's hard to think he's so young sometimes."

Dream turned to the prince, unable to contain the smile that broke out on his face. "At least he's enthusiastic."

With more of a docile nature, George insisted on checking out the ballroom. Dream and Sapnap followed behind the prince wordlessly as they passed the nicely decorated tables. Every so often, a servant would stop and ask George if everything looked okay—to which he'd reply with a curt 'of course, as always' and then they'd be moving again.

It took mere minutes for them to check over every single table, but thankfully, the mood changed when an all too familiar cook and guard stepped into the room with another handful of platters.

Bad barely got to set his platter down before he was locking eyes with the prince.

"George!" He'd shouted, wiping his dirtied hands onto his apron before he broke across the ballroom floor. With equal enthusiasm, George stepped forward, opening his arms to embrace his friend. "Happy birthday, you old fart!"

"Oh, don't remind me, please," the prince groaned, pulling his friend in tighter.

Amidst their encounter, Skeppy made his way across the floor too, bidding a quick happy birthday

to George before he stepped in line with Dream and Sapnap.

"You all look *so* well-rested," Skeppy spoke jokingly, nudging at both of his friends. "But anyway — what do you think of all of this? Everyone's been working extra hard to get everything set up in here that they had to pull in some extra guards to do the heavy lifting."

"It's *fancy*," Sapnap snorted, "way too fancy for me, honestly."

"Same," Dream found himself agreeing, "but I believe everyone did a wonderful job putting it all together. I can't imagine what it'd been like in previous years preparing for birthday celebrations. I feel like we always got lucky with extra shifts at the gate or whatever."

"Yeah, it's really weird seeing all this happen from the inside," Skeppy agreed, nodding his head as he adjusted his cape over his armor. "I'm excited to see everyone come in. I got hallway duty after this."

"Hallway duty," Sapnap parroted in an antagonizing manner. "Sounds fun."

"I mean, it should be," Skeppy insisted, throwing a thumb to the doors, "Wilbur and Techno will be out there too so it shouldn't be too bad. At least I don't have to actually mingle with the masses."

Two twin groans escaped Dream and Sapnap.

"Dream may have gotten more of the shit end of the stick tonight. All I have to do is follow George, like a *shadow*. Quiet and stealthy."

"I'll live, at least."

Their conversation was cut short as a small bell chimed in the ballroom. As if in sync, the servants around in the room began filing out like they were programmed to.

"And that's my cue to go," Skeppy groaned, running a hand through his hair. "It was nice seeing you two, even if it was just for a minute. Try to enjoy the night, for my sake!"

With a quick wave, Skeppy was making it to Bad's side, whispering something in his ear before they both bid their goodbyes to George. In carefully timed steps, the two walked side by side out of the ballroom just as Ranboo flew back in, Tommy and Tubbo following after him with their hands hanging over the hilts of their swords — the normal stance a royal guard should hold when escorting a royal.

"Your majesties, I can assure you, everything has come out phenomenally!"

With a bright smile, George walked over to the entrance of the ballroom to greet his parents. Tubbo and Tommy bowed in his presence before dismissing themselves from the king and queen's sides, immediately making their way to Dream and Sapnap.

"Now isn't this a fun sight!" Tommy called out, his hands dropping to his sides. "Big D, you look so out of place amongst us guards today."

"Your cheeks have a pretty shimmer to them!" Tubbo pointed out, taking a step closer to him to poke him in the cheek.

With a scrunched nose, he batted away Tubbo's hand.

"You look like a fancy ass royal or something," Tommy laughed, "how does it feel to be stripped

of your armor, guard boy?"

"Guard boy?" Dream laughed. "That's a new one."

"Well, of course! We got guard boy, bee boy, fire boy, and of course, the most handsome boy!" In a flaunting way, Tommy fanned himself with his hand, batting his eyes.

"Oh my God, I forgot about fire boy," Sapnap chuckled, bending at his stomach as he leaned forward.

"Oh everyone remembers the fire boy joke, mister 'let me stick my hand in this kiln and see if I catch on fire' mother f—"

"Language! Language!" Tubbo shushed him, pushing his hands into Tommy's face abruptly.

With wide eyes, Tommy swiped at Tubbo's hands. "I swear Tubbo, I really will kill you, I really will, don't you dare test me."

In the hour before the party began, they stayed like this—the guards huddled together, laughing and joking with one another with ease as the royals seated themselves at a table in the corner with Ranboo, speaking animatedly to one another.

It felt nice, Dream decided, being surrounded by happiness and friendship in the large ballroom that would be filled to the brim with guests soon enough.

But even then, he decided it was nicer when George ended up at his side again, grasping at his hand and giving the other guards a quick 'excuse me' as he pulled Dream away from them and toward the entrance of the ballroom, pulling him behind one of the many pillars in the room away from their sight.

"Hello there," Dream spoke, eyes turning down to the prince, "is everything okay?"

"Oh, yeah, everything's fine," George replied, grasping at Dream's hand a little rougher, "I just wanted to talk to you before it got too hectic in here. Ranboo said people should be arriving any minute now."

"Exciting, huh?"

"I guess," George hummed, rolling out his neck as he turned to face the opened ballroom doors. "I missed you though."

"We've been in the same room for an hour now—"

"I meant after you left this morning," George grumbled, turning to face him with rosy cheeks. "Thank you, for last night—and you know, not freaking out after I kissed you."

With screwed up eyebrows, Dream wheezed. "Didn't we already have this conversation? Why would I have freaked out? You know well enough I liked it."

"I don't know, I kind of expected it to just be an 'in the moment' thing and you'd regret it all come morning," George explained in a soft whisper. "You looked uncomfortable earlier when we were getting ready so I just assumed maybe you changed your mind."

This time, Dream doesn't laugh. The seriousness of what George was saying finally kicked in.

"Christine was just weird, and I hadn't expected you to say something in front of everyone,

especially something so forward," Dream assured, reaching out to hold both of George's hands in his. "I promise there's nothing I regret. Last night was perfect, you idiot."

George batted his eyes for a moment, a smile breaking on his face. "Oh, your way with words really gets me. You say such sweet things." The sarcasm lacing his tone had Dream really laughing this time.

"You know, I told you I wanted to be a poet—"

"Don't start with this joke again," George warned, pulling his hands away, "you idiot. You'd do better as a cattle wrangler than a poet."

"Oh, how your words burn me."

The two fell into a fit of laughter. With the back of his palm pressed against his lips, George tore away from Dream's side, making his way to a close by table filled with sweets. His eyes traced the table carefully before he examined a bowl of sweet candies held in a glass bowl. Once his laughter had subsided, he grabbed one of the small candies and popped it into his mouth with a hum.

"You move so fast from one thing to another," Dream can't help but comment as he follows after George, leaning against the table as he examines the prince's reaction to the candy. "Is it good?"

"I think so." George leaned across the table again, plucking one of the candies into his fingers.
"Want to try one?"

"Sure, why not." Dream held his hand out to George, but was pleasantly surprised when George ignored his open palm and brought the candy to his face. "Oh, *romantic*." The two giggled happily as Dream allowed the prince to drop the sweet candy into his mouth.

With a determined expression, George reached out for another candy, but their moment was broken as the clicking of heels in the hallway grabbed their attention.

The party was just beginning.

Secrets Never Stay Secrets

Chapter Summary

The entire room erupts around them into chaos as people scream and yell, and Dream can't help the way his eyes begin to tingle as tears well in his eyes.

This was not how this night was supposed to go.

This was not how people were supposed to find out.

The room was bustling with noise now, the once empty ballroom filled with people of all sorts dressed to the nine. Pretty women whose dresses cascaded around them like tails—men who wore their smiles with more pride than their actual clothes. It was definitely a party filled with royals—princes and princesses from everywhere, lords and earls all the same. There was a hum of electricity flowing through the crowd, everyone clearly happy and excited for the night to come. The noise of the crowd was starting to become background music to him, despite the actual musicians for the night standing off to the corner of the room, waiting to start.

Dream finds it surprisingly easy to hide from the incoming crowd of guests. Easily, he slips to Sapnap's side, watching from a far distance as George greets the newcomers into the ballroom with Ranboo. It's hard for him to think that was ever him—a prince, cordial and all. He hated the thought of crowds now and parties, but he had to guess that came with the trauma of childhood in Gwent.

"It's weird watching him be all royal and whatever," Sapnap finally commented after some time. "I was really wrong about him. Having been around him these past few days, it's like he's an *actual person*."

"Royals are real people at the end of the day, Sapnap," Dream scolded.

"No, I know, I know. I just—What I mean to say is some of them can just be so selfish and full of themselves and George just isn't that. It's refreshing."

Dream hummed in reply, knowing well enough that Sapnap was right. A lot of royals were selfish—you could have easily added him to the list of those selfish pricks anyway. At least George was nothing like he was, that's all that really mattered at the end of the day to him.

As minutes dragged into an hour, George finally pulled himself away from the doors of the ballroom, already looking exhausted as he dragged a hand through his hair haphazardly.

"I think almost everyone is here now," he mumbled under the roar of the crowd in the ballroom to Sapnap and Dream, "I'm going to be honest, I don't even know who half these people are."

"What, do you just invite random people?" Sapnap questions, confused.

"Sort of? Usually, invites are sent to neighboring kingdoms and kingdoms we have alliances with, for formality reasons. Keep everyone on good terms or whatever. I don't really bother to get to know people personally at these. Just dance and eat the night away."

"That's... depressing."

With a shrug, George tilted his head back, inspecting the crowd. "Life of a royal."

Dream could relate all too well.

"But, anyway," George turned his attention from the crowd to Dream with a pleasant cheesy smile, "I hope you planned on saving a dance for me."

Sapnap gave a low whistle as he turned his head away from the two, giving a subtle nudge to Dream. "Pretend I'm not here, you two. Just a figment of your imagination. I'll be over there, next to that pillar, if you need me." Sapnap, with a grin, was taking a few steps away from the two of them, wiggling his eyebrows as he did.

"Oh, so he does know," George chuckled, having yet to turn away from Dream yet.

"He picks up on social cues easily," Dream informed him, shrugging. "So, you're not saving a dance for a pretty princess?"

"Why would I do that when I have a knight in shining armor in front of me?"

Reeling into the joke, Dream looked down at himself, shrugging. "I'm not really sure, especially since it doesn't look like I'm your knight in shining armor," he sighed, tilting his head to the side with a smirk, "they stripped me of my armor, *princess*. Now I look like I could just be one of the many royals in here."

"Maybe that's a good thing," George hummed thoughtfully, having yet to step away yet. "No one will question it when I drag you onto the dancefloor with me."

"Now, who said I was actually going to save you a dance?"

George's expression dropped slightly as he stuck out his lower lip in a pout. "Oh, Dream, don't be like that, it's my birthday after all."

"You're pouting isn't going to get you far," Dream joked easily, getting lost to the warmth that fluttered in his chest just by *looking* at George.

Dream caught the way George ran his tongue across his bottom lip before he tilted his chin up and turned. "Well, if you feel that way, I can find another to dance with—"

Out of habit, Dream reaches out for him before he can go. Static crackled in his ears for a moment, the little baby hairs on the back of his neck stood up as his hand brushed the prince's, electricity soaring through his body at the touch.

At that moment, George was like the Sun. He had people orbiting around him, a full room of people here specifically for *him*. He was the center of attention tonight; the brightest person in the room. Dream could see it in the way everyone's eyes tracing the prince out of the corner of his eyes, some sizing him up as well, that everyone knew George was the sun.

Tonight, he was in a room filled with royals and he was nothing but a guard—a simple guard that George had seemed to like.

Tonight, he was stuck in a system of planets, all revolving around the sun; and he was nothing but a strange, cold little planet that *should have* been significant. Just a small planet who oddly spun around the sun in circles, but he was going in the opposite direction as everyone else.

He should have been the Pluto in tonight's system, the one person who didn't quite fit in in the room— the one person who was supposed to be nothing but a guest— nothing but a guard—

But as George's eyes settled back on him burningly, he wondered how the Sun could ever notice Pluto, even if it was just metaphorically. He wondered what he did to deserve such an intense look from someone like George— wonder what on Earth he had done to deserve to have George actually like him back.

Guilt shot through his system.

A heavy, soul-consuming, sensation of guilt.

"Have you changed your mind?" George questioned teasingly. "Will you accompany me to the first dance of the night?"

With a dry throat, Dream nodded, his hand slipping from George's quietly. "I'd love to accompany you, *your highness*."

As George led him to the dance floor, this time their hands not connected, the crowd around them parted and made room for the prince to make his way to the floor. Dream gazed across the lacquered wooden tiles, scared to follow for a moment, terrified to feel more eyes on him.

Would people know?

Would they recognize it—

Was it obvious?

He was pulled from his thoughts as the thrumming rhythm of classical music whispered into his ears, enticing him to follow after George as the elegant music started.

So, with a burst of courage he forgot he could hold, he followed after George.

The first song of the night was something slow and meaningful, something Dream knew he remembered the tune of but he couldn't quite rack up the name of it. Regardless, the second he stood at George's side, hands were reaching out for him, holding him tightly as the royals around them awed, slipping into partners with ease.

George held him with care, one hand gripping his shoulder, the other clenched around his own hand. In return, Dream dropped a hand to the small of his back, squeezing George's hand carefully.

As the music started, they swayed to the beat, following the couples dancing around them.

They danced similarly to how they did the night before— but this was more coordinated— more thought out than it had been last night. Their dance last night had been filled with emotion, sloppy and messily their steps were made, the two of them more invested on one another's face.

As Dream moved his left foot backward in a smooth motion, sliding across the slick floor, George slid his right foot forward, chasing after his retreating figure like a fox on a hunt. Dipping forward slightly, looking into the prince's eyes, Dream dragged his hand from the small of George's back to his ribs, his fingers trailing across the cool leather of his tunic like it was nothing. He watched the way George lowered his eyebrows, his lips parting at the touch, and he savored it. As his fingers tightened on his side, he brought his left foot forward, making them stop toe to toe as they swayed again to the music.

The song didn't last long, and soon enough, they were parting.

More music filled the room, something more upbeat.

As the night continued, Dream continuously found himself being tugged along the dance floor by George's warm hands, pulling him in and out of random dances. Every now and then, they'd come across someone George would recognize and he'd introduce them to Dream with a smile.

It was docile and welcoming, the feeling he felt when he was around George.

He liked that feeling.

Even as he was tugged off the dance floor, toward the table where the queen and king of Gantrick sat, he found himself happy and high off the feelings George sent his way.

His time at the table wasn't long. As per usual, they exchanged pleasantries. Both the king and queen commented on his appearance, saying he looked good—he said they looked even better, to which they both laughed. They spent a few minutes chatting about how well the party had been put together, spoke about everyone's outfits, and then something in the conversation shifted.

"Thank you Dream, for keeping George company," the king had commented thoughtfully, "he usually just sits around at his birthday parties and only speaks when spoken to, so it's nice to see him having a good time."

"You're a good influence on him, we think."

Needless to say, Dream couldn't stop thinking about what they said for the rest of the night.

As the party progressed, Dream found himself either at George's side or waiting idly with Sapnap as George spoke with other guests at the party.

As the sun began to set and the room dimmed, only lit by the beautiful chandeliers above them, things progressively got better.

An hour turned into two, and two turned into three, Dream found his limbs pleasantly becoming sore as he, George, Sapnap, Tommy, and Tubbo stood in front of one of the many sweets and pastries tables. The crowd around them was happy, buzzing with commotion as they clinked drinks and threw pleasant words to George.

They'd been talking about the recipes used to make the pudding, tarts, and custards; a simple topic but still one Dream found interested in.

"Bad made most of the recipe book, last I checked," George hummed thoughtfully as he took another spoonful of pudding into his mouth, "even when he was my guard, he spent a lot of time reading the collection of recipe books I had in my little library. I think that's where his love for cooking started."

"Ah, so you're the reason he dipped," Tommy grumbled with a laugh, "I miss seeing Bad around the castle. I doubt he misses me though, man always yelled at me, told me I spoke too many profanities for a guard."

"I mean, you do though," Tubbo pointed out, pulling one of the tarts to his lips. "Big man was just trying to help you out."

"Hey, I watch my mouth a good amount of the time."

"Sure you do, sure you do."

Thoughtfully, having finished a tart himself, Sapnap turned to George. "I don't ever remember there being a guard named Bad staying in the guard's quarters."

"Oh, yeah no he didn't stay there," George replied, "his father is my father's royal advisor. They both have rooms in the castle. Bad's lived here since he was a little kid."

"That would make sense," Sapnap hummed, turning to grab another tart from the table with greedy hands.

Dream thought about grabbing a tart for himself after watching Sapnap pop another one into his mouth, but sadly, he never got to try one. Instead, the music around them was changing into something he knew very well—the start of a mixer dance.

He gives the table a longing glance as he feels George grab his shoulders and push him to the floor, bidding their friends a quick, "we'll be back after this dance!"

So, he decides, that's how he ends up in the middle of the dance floor with George bowing in front of him as the music kicks up. The crowd around them has spaced out, each of them bowing to their respective partners.

"You know how to do one of these, don't you?"

Licking his lips, Dream couldn't help but roll his eyes. "Shouldn't that have been something you asked *before* you pulled me over here?"

"Perhaps," George agrees as they both stand straight, each of them raising an arm, "but you never seem to stop surprising me. I assumed you'd know this too. You seem... educated, in ballroom dancing."

"I guess I always have a few tricks up my sleeve, huh?"

Both of them are raising their left arms to the sky now, their right tucked respectfully behind their backs—and then they're moving.

They circle one another in slow steps, the crowd following them.

Under the crystalized light of the chandelier above them, Dream stares dreamingly into George's eyes, watches the way the light reflects off them—scared to look away in the heat of the moment. They keep spinning until the music pauses, uproaring just a moment later—then they're switching arms, spinning the other way.

There's a pleasant smile pulled across George's face as they draw closer to one another—this close, Dream can see the way the prince's earrings sway with his movements in a mesmerizing way.

As they drop their hands, they're grabbing one another—their right hands clasping as Dream's hand falls bruisingly onto George's hip—and then they're spinning extravagantly across the floor along with the other royals stepping across the floor on their tippy toes.

This type of dance style was different, very different from the slow movements of their previous dances together. This was a heated style of dance—a way to get to know your partner before switching to meet another.

Dream was dreading parting already, despite knowing they still had a fair amount of time.

In a fleeting moment of weakness, he pulls George's hips closer to his as they move across the dance floor again, this time Dream stepping backward, George following him.

"I'm actually surprised," George laughed quietly as they loosened their hands, turning once more. "I didn't think someone like you could keep up with a dance like this."

"Really? C'mon now, *George*, you should know better than to underestimate me at this point," Dream laughed as they came to a pause, back to the center of the room now.

"Hm, you're right." George tilted his head down, giving him a bow all while staring up at him through half-lidded eyelids.

Dream couldn't help the butterflies that soared through his stomach as he bowed back in return, both raising their hands once more as he stood.

"I'll see you again soon, my knight in shining armor," George had whispered as they began turning from one another. In an agonizingly slow movement, George brought his hand against Dream's cheek softly, his index finger tracing his cheek slowly before parting. In that moment, Dream could feel the cold golden ring he wore brush against his cheekbone—and it was enough to have him staring at the prince longingly as he moved toward his new partner, his cape flowing behind him.

He didn't bare his new dance partner a glance as they held hands and started moving across the dance floor in a similar way he and George had just been doing. His eyes were too busy trained on George, whose hands were now locked with some princess's.

As they moved across the floor spinning, George caught his eyes again, giving him a knowing smile as they twirled.

It was enough to have Dream melting.

"I know I wasn't the dance partner you were expecting tonight, but it's nice to see you again, *Clay*."

Everything in the room stops as white static fills Dream's ears. The voice is too familiar—the touch all the same—

He's tearing his eyes away from George in a blink of an eye, his heart practically stopping as a breath catches in his throat. He wonders if this was God's way of getting back at him for being an awful person—haunting him with figments of his imagination in his waking hours.

He realizes he's stopped dancing now, but he doesn't care.

Suddenly, there's a hand pressed against his right cheek—the touch is warm and uncomfortable—but he can't move—he can't speak—the room around him is spinning and—

"Damn," *he* spoke, pressing his thumb harder into Dream's cheekbone, "she got you good, didn't she?"

There's a lump in his throat and tears are threatening to spill down his cheeks, but nevertheless, Dream tries pulling away from the touch. "Holy shit," he mumbled in a hoarse voice, "I thought I killed you."

He smiles—*Fundy smiles*—

"And here I thought that Minx hadn't landed a scratch on you, but I guess we were both wrong huh?"

Fundy's hand slips from his cheek, and Dream is very aware that people are switching partners on the dance floor, but neither of them have moved yet.

Dream feels two seconds away from panicking now.

How was he alive?

He saw him—

He saw him fall to the snow-covered in his own blood—

Minx said he died—

Minx said he'd pay for the blood—

He's shaking now, bile rising in the back of his throat.

"Let go of me," Dream ordered, his voice shaking, "don't you dare touch me—"

He breaks.

There are tears flowing down his cheeks as he tries to pull away from Fundy, but ultimately he's pulled back in as Fundy's hand drops to his hip.

"Don't make a scene," Fundy warned, his voice low and gravely as he pushed his fingertips into Dream's side. "She doesn't know I'm here, okay? Calm down. We don't need to cause an unnecessary scene."

"Let go of me," he bit back out, trying to back away.

"Not until you calm down," Fundy returned, drawing him closer. He drops his hand from his side and quickly wipes his cheeks—the feeling all too familiar and yet so foreign.

Dream looks around them to catch the crowd around them still dancing—his eyes automatically going to search for George—but he can't find him—he doesn't see him—

And suddenly he's being led off the dance floor.

"Minx isn't here, yet," Fundy whispers to him, bringing him to one of the many pillars in the room. "Look at me—Clay, look at me."

He listens.

He looks at him—and suddenly he's seventeen again, crying about leaving him—

"We managed to get Minx caught up on her way here. Alex is holding her off, okay? You need to listen to me and listen to me carefully." Fundy's hands drop to his shoulders bruisingly. "Drista is here for you. She's been searching for you ever since she's come back and she *really* needs to talk to you, okay? You can't go shutting down right now."

He stares at Fundy, the words sounding like they were underwater.

"We need you, Clay—I *need* you."

There's a certain desperation in Fundy's expression that has him wanting to punch him.

As the music dies down around them and they stand there in silence, Fundy's hands slowly retracting from his shoulders, Dream feels a wave of emotions hitting him like a tsunami. Confusion, happiness, fear, and anger hit him all at once. Fundy was supposed to be *dead*. It wasn't like he wanted him actually dead—no, no he was happy he was alive—*ecstatic*, actually. But five years of guilt, five years of running, five years of keeping himself distant from people—all for what?

Fundy never died.

He was standing in front of him once again, asking too much of him—like he always did when they were kids.

It was all too much to take in.

Fundy was here. Drista was here.

They were here for him—just when things were finally looking up for him.

Where was he supposed to go from here, now?

"Fundy," he says warily, taking a step back from him, his feet hitting the supporting pillar behind him. "I don't get what you're asking of me—I... Why *now*?"

Everything he worked for was going to go out the window—his well-crafted persona—his friendships—his newly blossoming romance—it was all about to be ripped from his fingertips, wasn't it?

"You need to talk to Drista," he answers simply, "she'll explain everything to you. I promise you, I wanted to search for you sooner—I did—but I *meant* it when I told you I'd be happy for you, wherever you ended up. I wanted you to leave, but I knew my better judgement was clouded by selfish thoughts."

"I didn't want anyone coming to find me," Dream counters, his hands balling into fists at his sides, "what could you possibly need from me now, when I'm on Gwent's assassination list. There's nothing I can help you with now."

Fundy's eyes darken.

"Talk to Drista, please," he urges, "I don't know how much time we have, but we have to make this quick. We already wasted enough time."

"Why—"

"Dream?"

Behind Fundy, George emerges.

His hands are folded in front of him, a look of confusion plastered across his face as he steps beside Fundy. Dream's heart shatters at the sight.

"Hey, is everything okay?"

Two worlds clash at once, Dream bitterly thinks, as George reaches out for his hand.

"I went looking for you but I saw you slip away off the dance floor," he speaks, holding his hand a little firmer, "are you okay?"

"Uh— yeah, yeah no I'm fine," he lies, his eyes flickering to Fundy one last time before he looks down to George. He couldn't let his past be spilled like this—not on George's birthday—not in front of a crowd like this. "I started feeling a bit sick, that's all."

Instantly, the back of George's hand is pressed against his forehead wordily. He doesn't flinch away from the touch and instead, invites it, leaning in a little as George hums.

"Let's get you some water?" He suggests, tugging on his hand. He turns to Fundy for a moment, sending him a cheesy smile. "Thank you for looking after him for me."

A look of confusion wipes over Fundy's face. "Oh, of course," he replies stiffly.

And then he's gone from his sight, disappearing into the crowd like he was never there in the first place as George tugs him back to where the other guards had been standing waiting patiently for them.

Dream's heart clammers to his throat as he finds himself standing at Sapnap's side, everything around him happening so fast and yet so slow at the same time.

His brain couldn't keep up with what was happening. Everything was about to fall apart in front his eyes.

Hadn't Fundy mentioned Minx would be here soon?

They knew he was here—

Quackity— Alex—he must have known he'd been here the whole time, he must have told them.

So why did Fundy say Alex was the one holding Minx back? What the hell was going on?

"Can you keep an eye on him real quick? I'm going to grab some water," George speaks, sounding distant, like he was a planet away.

"Sure, *your highness*," Sapnap replies without missing a beat.

George is lost to the crowd next, and suddenly, there's a cold hand at his neck.

"Dream, you okay buddy?" Sapnap questioned carefully, just loud enough for him to hear. "You look like you just saw a ghost."

"Because *I did*," he replies with all seriousness as he turns his attention to Sapnap.

Sapnap's joking smile falters as he sees how serious Dream was. "What?"

Dream turns quickly, catching Tommy and Tubbo out of the corner of his eyes—they're far away, too far for them to overhear their conversation.

In an instant, he's making a decision he knows he'd regret. A decision he'd never be able to back out on.

It wasn't a decision he wanted to make. He thought he could outrun his past, but he knew he couldn't now. Not with Drista here looking for him, not with Fundy alive—not with Minx on her way to this kingdom.

He had to not be selfish for once.

This wasn't just about him anymore.

"The other night, before the dinner party," Dream recalls, turning back to Sapnap fast enough to give himself whiplash, "you said I always struck you as a runaway thief."

Something clicks, he sees it in Sapnap's expression. "Dream, where are you going with this? What happened?"

"My past, it's finally caught up to me," he says warily, "you said you'd fight on my behalf, did you mean it?"

"Dream—"

"Did you mean it?" He questions with more urgency.

"Dream," Sapnap bites out, grabbing Dream by the shoulder. "I meant it, now spill. What's going on?"

"Promise me that after whatever happens tonight, you'll protect George."

Sapnap freezes, his breath catching in his throat.

"What the *fuck* aren't you telling me?" Sapnap questions, his voice rising. "This isn't funny, whatever is going on—I meant it, okay Dream? I trust you, I've always trusted you. I will do whatever you need me to do but you need to be honest with me or I won't do *anything*."

Dream licks the bottom of his lip, his hands shaking, his eyes falling to the ground.

He rips the bandage off fast.

"I hated it when you kept comparing my situation with George to the one that happened in Gwent," he mumbles, taking in a deep breath, "because I swear to God, it was never the same thing—"

"Dream."

Dream picks his head up, squeezing his fingernails harshly into his palms.

"I never tried manipulating Fundy," he answers, "I never tried using him. We were friends, even if he wanted more. I never wanted him to get involved in my escape, okay? I never meant to hurt him the way I did."

Sapnap doesn't say anything as his jaw drops.

"I've had an assassin after my head for the past five years for treason, and she's on her way here tonight. Princess Drista of Gwent and Fundy are here for me," he explains, stumbling over his words, "and I fear my time here is coming to an end."

"So—you're a runaway prince," Sapnap clarifies, to which he nods. "Prince Clay, of Gwent?"

"I'm sorry," he mutters under his breath, "I hated lying, I've hated hating hiding who I was—I know that they made the story seem much worse than it was, I know how bad it looks from the outside but I promise there was a reason I did everything I did."

"I believe you," Sapnap insists, despite the long look on his face. "I—I trust you. So, what's happening?"

"I don't know," Dream answers nervously, "Fundy found me and pulled me from the dance floor, said I needed to speak with my sister—"

"You should do that, then. They wouldn't be here without a reason, right?"

"I'm scared for what that reason will be," Dream replies, "I don't—I don't want to have to leave."

"I don't think anyone would want that, but you need to hear them out," Sapnap supplies shakily.
"Does George know?"

"No—I don't want him to know, not yet," Dream insists, "you can't tell him, okay? Just please promise me that if something happens, you'll look after him for me?"

Something unreadable plays across the guard's face.

"I promise," he finally answers, grabbing Dream's hand as he spoke. "Is there anyone else that knows?"

"Techno knows. He knows everything," Dream answers quickly, his eyes catching George already on his way back, two glasses of water held in his hands. "If something goes wrong and we can't speak again—ask him whatever you need to. I don't care. Just keep him safe for me."

Sapnap doesn't give him a verbal response. He simply nods, dropping his friend's hand as George approached them, extending the glass toward Dream with a timid smile.

Graciously, Dream took the cold drink in between his hands and brought it to his lips shakily.

"Are you going to be okay?" George questioned. "Do you need to sit down or go lay down somewhere? You seem really shaky."

"I'm fine, seriously," Dream pushed, "just tired. Don't worry about it."

"Are you sure—the party will be over in a few hours, you really don't have to stay for the whole thing if you're not feeling good."

"I'm sure," Dream insisted as he passed the now empty glass to Sapnap.

George is saying something to him—he's sure of it—but his eyes catch *her* and he can't even focus.

She's hiking up the sides of her oversized green dress as she makes it toward him confidently. If he had to be honest—she barely looked different from when she last saw him. Her hair has grown a foot since they last saw one another, but it was the same distinctive dirty blond it always had been. Her cheeks were still littered with thousands of freckles, similar to him, and her emerald green eyes were locking with his.

Drista—basically the spitting image of him in girl form—was making her way to him after all these years. With a bright smile on her face, she was gathering everyone's attention around them, bowing slightly.

"I'm sorry to interrupt," she spoke, her voice dainty, "but I was wondering if I could steal *Dream* for a moment?"

Sapnap and George turned to her with confused expressions, but before either of them could speak, Dream was stepping toward her.

Drista didn't give him bad memories. Drista was the one person who made him happy in his previous life—excluding Fundy—because that whole situation had way too many tainted memories associated with it.

She was the one family member he really ever had.

"Of course," he found himself speaking. With a smile, she raised her hand to him. He took it generously, bidding a quick goodbye to George and Sapnap who looked rather hurt as he walked toward the dance floor again.

As they made it back to the hard aluminum floor, Drista took no time in speaking.

"Dream's an awful alias, *Clay*."

"I've heard worse," he responded, finding both of his sister's hands in his. "What are you doing here?"

They blended into the crowd, dancing with the masses as Drista laughed.

"What do you think I'm doing here? You spoke with Fundy."

"He wasn't very keen on *why* you were here, all he said was I should speak to you."

"Oh," she sighs, her eyes dropping to the floor, watching their feet move as they danced. "Who were those two you were just with? We've been trying to find a good time to approach you all night, but you were always around them."

Dream sighed this time. "You attend his party and don't even know him? That was Prince George, the guard was my friend, Sapnap," he answers easily.

Drista shrugs. "In all fairness, I came here searching for you. Alex said he knew you'd be here, either at the party or in the town square, so here we are." She paused, taking a deep breath. "Why are you in this ballroom, dressed so fancily, Clay?"

Dream doesn't answer for a moment as he trips over his own feet.

"What does that matter?" He finds himself asking. "What are you doing here? You wanted to talk, right?"

Drista just rolled her eyes. "You're still the same impatient boy I remember," she points out, "*they* still talk about you sometimes. It's weird to think I'm supposed to have a brother."

"Okay—what does that have to do with—"

"Last I checked, mother and father told me you were dead," Drista cuts him off curtly.

His heart stops in his chest.

"They told our kingdom that after you ran away, you perished in the snow. I believed them for a while. All hope for our kingdom was lost that day, and every single person blamed the king and queen," she explains, being quick with her words. "After Fundy recovered, he insisted I speak with him. He told me about how Minx and Alex were sent to find you and that you weren't actually dead. For years, I held hope they'd find you—I didn't want to do this all on my own."

There was a sorrowful tone to her voice—one that had Dream feeling more guilty as the seconds passed.

"When Alex showed up last month, he told Fundy instead of Minx that he was sure he found you—but she overheard."

Taking another deep breath, Drista tilted her head up.

"We've been working all this time to find a way to keep you safe from their wrath. The kingdom has been in uproars and rebellions have been happening. Every day for weeks now, there have been demonstrations on the streets, saying that the people will no longer take to the king and queen's words. The kingdom, they're planning to overthrow them, and any day now, they will be killed."

Drista's words hung heavy in the air.

"I need you to come back to Gwent with me. We can get there before Minx finds us—her and her little scoundrel gang—they want these uproars to stop. I don't want them to stop us. I want the kingdom to overthrow the pathetic excuse for parents we have—and I want you to be there to pick up the shambles of our kingdom."

Dream doesn't know when or how it happens—but for the second time, he's pulled off the dancefloor, brought *right* back to Fundy's side.

Feeling both surrounded, and a little pathetic, Dream tore his hands away from his sister.

"No—no, I am *not* the person you people think I am anymore," he states, feeling a little more stable than he did earlier. "I have a life here—responsibilities—I can't just uproot everything again—"

"You had no problem leaving bigger responsibilities," Drista points out as she crosses her arms over her chest. "So what, you're a guard, right? You belong as a prince—as a *king* somewhere else."

"Actually, I'm a royal guard for his highness, George," Dream corrects, feeling both pairs of eyes bore down on him like the scorching sun, "I can't just leave again. I don't belong in Gwent, that is not my home nor my people anymore—"

Fundy's eyes are watching him with anger as he grabs onto his hands. "I know the last thing you ever want to do is return to Gwent, but Clay, you have no idea how hard we have worked to get to where we are. We need you to come back with us."

He sounds so desperate, it shatters his heart. Looking from his former guard to his sister, he sees that she is sporting a similar expression, her jaw locked.

"We don't have for games anymore, Clay," she informed him, pulling her hair back away from her neck, "the assassination will take place any day and you need to be the one that picks up our kingdom, do you understand? You need to be the one to set things straight, with Fundy by your side. I don't care what you do after that, for God's sake, I'll make sure myself I marry you off to another kingdom if I have to. I'll take the throne when it's time, but right now, our people need you." She paused, biting her lip as tears formed in her eyes. "My people need you. I need you, Clay."

He felt tears prickle at the back of his own eyes as shame washed over him. He knew what he'd be doing if he declined. He knew he'd be making the wrong decision.

But he couldn't just leave another life—especially this one—especially one he was so happy with

"I'm not the ruler you're looking for," he speaks with all seriousness, "I have spent these past five years training to take a life, not to save them."

Drista takes a confident step forward, pulling at the sides of her dress. "You're a royal guard, are you not?" She throws an arm behind her, motioning to the room around them. "That damned prince is under your care, don't give me that bull shit that you're not here to save lives. I know you're a good person, Clay. I know what you're capable of."

"I'm not the same person I was then— why don't you get that?" He raises his voice, moving his hands frantically. "I have spent years running from my past, I'm not ready to just waltz back into a kingdom that thinks I killed my own guard. I'd be seen as a fool—"

An ear-piercing shriek breaks their conversation. Around them, people are moving, yelling as the music comes to a halt.

In a moment flat, the guards around them are turning their attention to the doors of the ballroom. With a fast racing heart, Dream was pushing his sister away from him, staring at the door with wide eyes.

Standing there, dripping in sweat and blood, was *her*— his fucking assassin.

In one hand, she held a sword above her head, in the other she held a man's arm bruisingly, tugging him closer to her side.

"Fuck," Fundy whispered beside him, "that's Alex!"

Dream's eyes are frozen on her as she takes a step into the room, pushing the man in front of her before bringing the sword to his throat. The guards around them all falter— clearly recognizing the awol guard.

"Well, I've got everyone's attention, huh?" *Minx* cackled into the room, pulling Alex by the shoulder as she pressed the blade of her sword to his jugular. "I suggest everyone keeps real fucking still, or this piece of shit dies."

The room is silent, only filled with Minx's laughter.

"Funny, you all can party as one of the worst people ever to exist mingles with you like he's one of you?" She pulls her sword from Alex's throat and lifts it triumphantly into the air. "Oh God, this is going to be so fun! Am I going to have to sit here and pull teeth, or are you people going to hand over your harbored piece of shit willingly?"

No one moves. With his heart in his throat, Dream turns to look toward the center of the room where he remembered last seeing George. Surely, he is still there, Sapnap now at his side protectively.

His throat goes dry at the sight— George, standing there, his eyes wide as he grips onto Sapnap. His lip is caught between his teeth, his eyes jumping around the room— probably looking for him.

God, he didn't want things to go down like this. Never like this.

Suddenly, something cold and slick is being pushed into his hands. Looking down, he catches the glint of a knife as Fundy pushes it into his grip.

"Take one of us hostage, right now," Drista whispers, eyeing the knife. "It's the only way we're getting out, do it!" She raises her voice, dragging the ballroom's attention to them.

Acting on instinct, he grabbed Fundy's hand and turned him around, pushing him a good two feet away from the pillar they'd been standing in front of. Not wasting a second, he pushed his body against him and raised the knife to his throat, feeling Drista settle at his side.

Everyone's eyes were on him now as gasps rang around the room.

"I swear to God Minx," he croaked out, his grip on Fundy tightening. "Don't do anything you're going to regret."

Something in Minx's eyes shifts as she points her sword to the floor.

"Oh, here we go again, murderous Prince Clayton looking to finish his job on his deranged lover? Should I have delivered him to your doorstep, *Dream*?" She draws out his nickname with a laugh as she pushes Alex to the floor in front of her. The entire room erupts around them into chaos as people scream and yell, and Dream can't help the way his eyes begin to tingle as tears well in his eyes.

This was not how this night was supposed to go.

This was not how people were supposed to find out.

Don't Say Goodbye

Chapter Summary

"Typically I hate making promises, but I guess you're right. No one else here deserves to suffer for the likes of you."

The next events happen in a whirl of confusion. Alex is kicked away from Minx, a blood-stained hand is wrapped around his shoulder, and someone in the crowd screams his real name.

His heart drops when he sees that George is standing in front of Sapnap, pupils blown.

Somehow, Dream knew he could *never* come back from this now.

They had an audience— an audience filled with people who thought they knew Dream— Dream, just a guard from Gantrick— Dream, the guard who always wore that stupid smiley face mask like a proud symbol— Dream, the boy who came to Gantrick with nothing and built his way up from there— Dream, a liar hiding behind a mask.

He was scared to look around, scared to find a familiar face looking at him— scared to see their reactions.

He kept his eyes trained on Minx as shouts began from the hallway.

He could make out Techno screaming— Wilbur shouting orders— Skeppy crying something out—

But he couldn't make out what was going on anymore as his vision zeroed on Minx.

He knew that this whole goose chase must have driven her to the binks of madness— but this? Showing up to another *kingdom*, threatening their people? This was a war crime— and she didn't even care.

All she cared about was him, and that alone was a terrifying thought.

"You may have all these bastards fooled that you're some jewel in the rut, but you have never fooled me. I should have finished your ass that day I caught you! Pressed my hands harder into that pretty throat of yours!" She raises her sword to him, a cackle leaving her. "I'd love to hear for you to beg for me to stop! I loved the way you teared up, and to think, I went easy on you!"

With another laugh, she kicked out her boot and dropped her foot onto Alex's back, causing him to cry out in pain. He felt Fundy flinch in his clutches.

"Don't play coy with me, Clay. Go ahead, finish him. Fundy has always been waiting for his execution! Finish him, you *incompetent fuck!* Maybe you should have done it right the first time!"

Dream's jaw drops as he lowers the knife. He can feel Fundy shaking against him as another wave of guilt hits him. Somehow, he knows holding a hostage won't work against her.

"Don't make a fool out of yourself now," she tilts her head, her eyes traveling across the room,

"we've got a big audience, *Clayton*. Make this easy and just let me finish you. We can step outside if you'd like? That way these beautiful people don't have to witness your guts spilling!"

Dream licks the bottom of his lip as he pushes Fundy away from him with force. The guard tumbles, gasping as he drops to the floor.

"You're a sick, twisted person," he grumbles, clenching the knife in his hand a little harder. "You should have been the one I shot that night."

She raises an eyebrow at him. "Oh, yeah? Where was that energy five years ago?" She turns her head down to Alex, pushing her boot into his back with force. "You had *three* targets Clay, and yet, you went after him? What, did you not like his romantic gestures?"

Fundy stood from the floor, raising a hand to Minx. "That's enough. I told you countless times we weren't anything."

"And yet, you still took the fall for him, you spent all this time searching for him again to save him, and he just spared your damn life." With confidence, Minx drove her sword into the floor beside Alex's head, driving a roar from the crowd. "Come here, Clay! You can be the one on the other edge of this sword. I want to finish your little romance story with some Romeo and Juliette ending. Fundy would surely appreciate that, wouldn't he?"

A mix of heat and tears were collecting on Dream's cheeks now. With a terrified expression, he turned back to the crowd, all eyes on him.

George's eyes on him.

Sapnap's eyes on him.

All he could see was betrayal.

With a breathy gasp, he turned his head back to Minx.

What did he have to lose now? He'd just had everything ripped from him in front of a whole audience—his persona—his safety net—his *love*. How could George ever look at him the same after *this*.

What was he even going to think?

God—what were his *parents*, the king and queen of Gantrick, going to think?

Dream didn't want to know.

No, no he didn't need to know.

It'd only hurt him more—

With a shaky step, he was stepping forward, capturing Fundy's arm and Drista's at the same time.

"I swear to God Minx if you say we were something one more time I'm going to lose it," Dream warned, pulling at both arms at his sides.

"Yeah? What're you going to do about it?" She batted her eyelashes innocently, leaning against the hilt of her sword. "C'mon, don't be shy, show our audience the type of person you really are, *Dream*. Crack. Do it. Show them you're only here because you're selfish."

Dream clutches onto the two arms a little harder.

He doesn't know what to do anymore, so he goes with the only tactic he knows.

"I thought you were done with me, and yet here you are, chasing my ass like it's the only thing you know. It's kind of pathetic, honestly."

At the comment, Minx's face falters.

"You spent five years doing what, chilling out? I had the smallest head start over you, and yet, I managed to outsmart you for five years? What do you gain out of this, adding another kill to your list?"

"Unlike you, Clay, I finish what I start!"

In a swift movement, she was pulling a dagger from her back and throwing it his way. With a scream, he pushed both Fundy and Drista to the floor, causing both to yelp.

The knife doesn't find its target, he finds, as it lands into the pillar behind him—right where Drista had been standing.

His heartbeat quickens.

"I am not letting all those years of *pain* and *torture* I withstood go to vain," she informs him, digging her heel harder into Alex's back, "this is all your fault. If you didn't leave, we wouldn't be here now, would we? I'll be damned if I don't get my revenge."

With a fast hand, she pulled another knife between her fingers and flicked her wrist—

Another knife pelted into the pillar behind him.

"Awe, don't dodge me now," she cackled, pulling another knife as she pulled her sword up. "You were so willing to let me kill you all those years ago? What, do you have cold feet now? Something keeping you here?" She aimed her knife to the floor, her eyes landing on Drista. "What do I have to do to get to you? Kill her? Kill Fundy? What would break you enough, Clay?"

He can't help but scoff as he takes a step closer to her. "Nothing would break me at this point."

With a testing smile, she turns her head. "I want to have a little fun before this night ends, Clay. How about you watch every single person in this room perish before your very eyes. All their blood will be on your hands. Wouldn't that be a perfect way to go out?"

In a fleeting thought, he wonders how she thinks she could kill in a room like this? Surely, the second she stepped away from Alex, the guards would be on her ass.

But the next thought that comes to mind is *George*. Just George.

Would she target him?

He can tell dread overtakes his face when he finds Minx smiling.

"Oh, that would totally break you, wouldn't it?" She turned to the crowd with a sick smile, raising her sword to them. "You have to care about someone here, right? Someone has got to be important enough to shatter everything!"

Before he can answer, he finds why no guards have attacked yet.

Several people dressed in similar clothes step into the room behind her, completely suited up with weapons at hand, blood dripping from their clothes—

His thoughts raced to the guards and knights that should have been in the hallway with them—

"You're about to get first-class seating to a *massacre*—"

The group behind her begin to step into the room and suddenly the guards are moving forward.

"Who's going to be first, Clay? Should we start with your fellow guards, or start with the royals—"

"Stop!" He calls out shakily.

There's a room filled with defenseless people— defenseless royals who had a purpose. It wasn't worth putting them at risk— putting his fellow guards at risk— God, he could only think of what just happened in the hallway—

How did they manage to get past the guards? Who out there was hurt enough that they just let Minx slink right in here?

"If I'm the only person you want to kill, then do it."

Common sense flies out the window as he puts his hands into the air, the knife he held dropping to the floor beside his feet. He can see both Drista and Fundy getting to their feet, but he keeps his eyes solely locked on the assassin.

"No one else needs to get hurt because of me."

"Why not? You didn't seem to care about that when you shot Fundy, or left your people in disasters!" She shouts bitterly, rubbing her foot into Alex's spine. "Maybe I want you to feel some of that pain too, but I mean, if you're offering yourself up, how could I say no?"

With careful footsteps, Dream walked his way to Minx, ignoring both Drista and Fundy's attempts at grabbing him.

At least his death meant sparing a hundred lives.

At least then, he could finally stop worrying.

At least he could be sparing George's life.

As he takes another step towards Minx, he can hear his sister shout, "you don't have to do this!"

He's a step away from her grasp now, close enough to hear Alex panting on the floor beneath him.

"Promise me if I just, let you kill me, you'll leave everyone else in this ballroom alone."

"Typically I hate making promises, but I guess you're right. No one else here deserves to suffer for the likes of you."

The next events happen in a whirl of confusion. Alex is kicked away from Minx, a blood-stained hand is wrapped around his shoulder, and someone in the crowd screams his real name.

His heart drops when he sees that George is standing in front of Sapnap, pupils blown.

"Oh," Minx gasps from his side, digging her fingernails into his shoulder. "Well isn't this a

surprising turn of events? You do have someone who cares for you, I see."

With a clenched jaw, he stares George down with as much seriousness as he can muster. The prince is standing there, tears welling in his eyes as he looks to him desperately— his hands are balled into fists— his arms shaking—

"No, I'm just his guard."

Sapnap reaches out to grab George but ultimately fails as the prince pulls away from his grasp frantically, looking like he'd burned from just the grasp of Sapnap's fingertips.

Dream doesn't miss the way Sapnap reaches behind his back, his hand wrapping around the hilt of his sword as he reaches for the prince again.

"And your prince here, he knows your *real* name, huh?"

Dream locks his jaw, and turns his eyes away from George. "It was a slip-up— he only cares because I'm his last resort of protection—" He tries to reason with her, stumbling over his words unconvincingly. His heart is hammering against his ribs bruisingly now, and it's making him sick to his stomach.

"I don't think that's the case," she sighs, digging her fingernails into his shoulder, "see, the difference between you and me Clay, is I don't give a fuck. I don't care who I hurt, I don't care who I have to kill, I don't care how many crimes I commit— I have *no* remorse."

She brings her sword to his chest, a sharp grin on her face as she drags the cold steel of the blade across his shirt, tearing it at the seams as she makes her way towards his neck.

This close, he can basically see the crazy in her eyes.

"I don't care about the consequences anymore, and because of that, I *will* get what I want finished, unlike you."

Grabbing hold of his shirt with an iron fist, she drops her sword.

"Schlatt, get me that damn prince over there!"

The room explodes into chaos.

A man from behind Minx stands, giddy with excitement as he unsheathes his swords. His eyes settle onto George, the grin of the devil kissing his lips as he starts moving.

Finally, the guards that have all but waited patiently for the right moment to strike are thrown into motion.

Dream, for a good few minutes, thinks he's dead as the world becomes a blur of nothingness.

There are a handful of things he's able to pick up.

Minx, pushing the tip of her blade into his collarbones, slicing the sharp blade into his chest— it's not deep enough to cause too much harm— but it's deep enough to have him gasping out in pain as his vision sways with white as his shirt is stained with his own blood. She's holding him by the collar of his shirt— pushing him away from people—

Guards flooding into the room, swords clashing on the dance floor.

He can hear familiar voices—he can see familiar faces—but he's pretty sure he's been hit on the head with the hilt of Minx's sword in the mix of it all.

He's looking to the floor, a hand on the back of his neck as he stares down at his hands which have been covered in his own hot blood.

He feels like puking—he knows he stronger than this—but something doesn't feel right—

And suddenly someone's crashing into him—Minx is screaming—there are familiar hands grabbing him, pulling him up, holding him by his chest.

"Clay!" Someone calls desperately. "Get up, c'mon, get up—"

There's someone holding onto his back, but in front of him, as his vision begins to clear, stands Techno.

"Get out of here before she finds you," he speaks loudly through the screaming around him, "or your head is as good as gone. Don't stop running, ever. You got it? This is the last time I'm ever helping you."

He's nodding frantically at the instructions, turning to see the now bloodied dance floor.

The royals have gathered into the corners of the room now as Minx's gang—the Gwent assassins—attack against Gantrick's best guards.

He doesn't know where Minx has gone. She's been replaced as Drista, Fundy, Alex, Sapnap, and *George* crowd around him frantically.

"Let's go, let's go!"

Dream lets himself be led out of the ballroom by unfamiliar hands.

He's too panicked to focus on anything—everything was too much—he couldn't deal with it—

The second they're in the hallway, he wonders if he entered the apocalypse.

Bodies litter the floor—not a single one of them being a Gantrick guard. Broken bodies of Gwent's assassins lay in piles on top of each other, and the sight alone left him dry heaving. Necks, bent out of shape—arms bent at angles they shouldn't have been bent at—swords pressed through flesh and bone—blood staining the once beautiful carpets of the castle hallways—

He's hurling.

Someone's rubbing a hand between his shoulder blades soothingly, and then suddenly he's back to standing and running.

"Where are we going?" Drista's familiar voice calls out. "We can take him from here, we have a carriage waiting—"

"He can't leave with you guys unarmed," Sapnap answers frantically and loud, "his sword and armor are still at the guard's quarters, just down the way out of the castle."

"Drista, we can't just leave this kingdom to fight against ours! We're to blame for them coming here, we have to do something," Fundy urges urgently.

In front of him, Drista and Fundy are running, Sapnap leading them through the hallways of the

castle frantically, his sword unsheathed in one hand, the other holding onto Alex.

Beside him—a hand clutches his left hand like a lifeline—they're shaking, their fingers squeezing bruising around his knuckles—

He wonders how George can even touch him right now.

The longer they follow after Sapnap, the more Dream gathers his bearings as the situation finally settles in his mind.

His left hand is clenching his chest, right where Minx had cut him. The contact stings and he can tell now he's bled through his shirt, but he doesn't care, especially not when they make it out the castle doors and they're running against the familiar gravel grounds of the kingdom he'd called home for five years.

"Tell me you guys have more weapons stored wherever we're going?" Drista questions.

"Plenty!"

When they make it to the guards' quarters finally, Sapnap slams the door open to the empty house, pulling each of them in frantically before he slams the door and locks it.

Before he can stop himself, he's slumping against the wall of the main room—shaking as he takes George down with him.

"Hey—hey," George calls cautiously, a hand grabbing at his cheek, forcing him to look at the frantic prince, "breathe, we're all okay—we're okay—"

When he blinks down at the brunette, he notices that his once beautiful clothes were stained with dark blood.

He finds himself stumbling over his words as he sits up, grabbing for the prince's shoulder frantically.

"Hurt—you're hurt—"

"No, no, no," George reassures him, "it's your blood, I'm okay, I'm fine."

George's thumb brushes across his cheek in circles, soothing his worries just a bit. He finds himself breathing a little easier as his head meets the wall.

"Bandages," Sapnap mutters, walking further into the guards' quarters, "we've got to patch him up and then we can figure out what to do."

"We?" Dream parrots, looking up from the floor.

Beside him, Drista, Alex, and Fundy stood, looking down at him with wide eyes as Sapnap rumbled through the medic room.

"There's no *we*—you patch me up and we'll figure something out. You need to stay here with George."

The hand retreats from his cheek.

"You think I'm just going to let you deal with this alone?"

"I'm not alone," Dream argues, turning back to the brunette, "Drista and Fundy are here, *you* on the other hand have other things to worry about— like your parents—"

"Tommy and Tubbo would never let anything happen to them," George counters, gripping his hand harshly, "I'm not going to just watch you slip from my fingertips."

"This was always the inevitable," Dream finds himself saying. "I would have had to leave eventually."

George's wide and teary eyes blink at him owlishly, and suddenly, Dream wishes Minx hadn't missed his neck in all the commotion.

Part of Dream cursed the world. He was so close— so close to attaining that untouchable happiness that had always wavered over his head. So close to finally moving on with his life— finally accepting that maybe it was okay to start a new. George made him want to feel alive rather than just simply *live*. He hadn't felt like that before— and there George was, offering that sweet feeling of happiness on a silver platter.

The world hated him, didn't it? It made him a broken person, forced him to grow into someone he wasn't. It made him believe that he had killed his dearest friend, only to push them back together in a messy dance. It made him believe that after years of trying, he'd made a home for himself— only to have it ripped away from him. After all this time of believing he couldn't love in this life, the world gave him a little taste of it— and now it was about to be ripped away from him.

He couldn't think selfishly on this matter, as much as he wanted to.

He had a kingdom waiting for him— a sister who needed him by his side. He had a whole ballroom in shambles because of his presence. He had to do something. He had to leave with Drista and Fundy. He had to find a way to get Minx and the rest of Gwent's assassins far away from the kingdom of Gantrick.

He couldn't have any more people swept into the crossfire of his actions.

For a fleeting moment, he pretended he was okay with it. As Drista, Fundy, and Alex spoke outside of the room he'd called his own for five years in quiet whispers, he pretended he was okay with leaving with them.

As Sapnap sat quietly in front of him, pressing rolls of bandages around his shoulders and over his chest, he pretended he hadn't lied to the one person he'd considered his best friend for five years.

As George sat beside him, clutching his hand silently as he watched Sapnap bandage him up, he pretended that love had never ignited.

He was always good at pretending, wasn't he? He could do it again. Pretend his life in Gantrick never existed— but he knew he never wanted to do that. As easy as it was to think about, he couldn't do it. He couldn't pretend his persona, Dream, never existed. He couldn't pretend he didn't love the exhilarating feeling that came with wearing the golden suit of armor he knew as his uniform for five years. He couldn't pretend that his friendships with Sapnap, Skeppy, and the rest of the guards meant nothing to him. He couldn't just forget about George— couldn't forget about the way his lips felt against his— the way they felt pressed together under silk sheets.

He couldn't just simply step out from his life in Gantrick and step into this new role that was supposedly waiting for him in Gwent.

He wouldn't have traded the memories he'd made here for anything else in the world.

When Sapnap tore off the last pieces of bandages, Dream found himself standing, forcing George to let go of his hand. He walked to the corner of the room, shucked off the torn and bloodied shirt, and dug through his dresser to find a pair of fresh clothes to put on under his armor.

Again, he pretended. He pretended that the tears welling in his eyes weren't there. Pretended that the slight tremor in his hands was nothing but a fluke as he changed carefully and swiftly.

"I'm going to step out for a moment," Sapnap announced to no one in particular. "I'll go see what I can help them plan out."

He listened to his friend's retreating footsteps, listened as the door creaked open and shut.

With an almost saddened sigh, Dream realized he'd been left alone with George.

"Clay," the prince had called out dejectedly, his voice wet. Dream refused to look up as he pulled on one of the first undershirts he grabbed. "Clay, please," he tried once more to no avail.

Willing the tears in his eyes to dry, Dream ignored George's voice as he pulled his armor on and seized his sword. The moment he sheathed his sword into its holster on his belt, hands were pulling him weakly toward the cots. He complied, letting George tug him down onto the corner of one of the beds, their fingers intertwining.

"Can we talk, please—" His voice cracked and as Dream looked up from the floor, he caught a tear sliding down his stained cheeks. "Are you just going to sit there in silence, or are you going to talk to me?"

This time, a wet chuckle left the back of Dream's throat. He couldn't help the tears that seeped through his closed eyelids as he dipped his head down, resting them on their intertwined hands.

He tightened his grip around George's fingers.

"I wouldn't have left Northwick if I knew this would be the last time I got to see you," George admits sadly. "I should have been selfish—should have told you to run away with me—"

The last bit of selfishness that Dream feels himself holding falls from his lips.

"You don't have to stay here anymore," he mutters, his eyelashes fluttering against George's cold hands, "you can come with me. We can run away from this place, just you and me. I promise it can be better than this."

The second the words leave his lips, he regrets it.

Visions of him and George swim through his mind—hands interlocked as they walk the markets of Gantrick—feet rushing against carpeted floors as they chase each other about the castle—feet in the grass, hands skimming the trunks of trees as they run through the gardens of the castle and into the forest—swords clashing, masks breaking—

He wonders how different life could be if they abandoned it all. They could pretend these lives never happened—start over somewhere fresh—

"Really? Do you mean that?" There's hope lacing George's voice.

Dream hates the way he lies to George.

He knows deep down, he can't do that. He can't be selfish anymore.

He, so badly, wants to sweep George off his feet and take him away from all of this. He knows George would let him, too.

But he can't.

They have two different paths set for them right now.

"I wish we could," he finds himself saying, pools of tears falling from his eyes. "Maybe if it was a week ago, I would have actually done it. Pulled you away— been selfish."

George laughs. It's filled with sorrow. "If you had asked me, I would have said yes. I would have let you take me anywhere."

Dream doesn't bother to look up. "This doesn't bother you?"

"What?"

"*This*," Dream reiterates, tugging George's hands closer, "my past. Everything that just happened in the ballroom. You found out in the worst way possible and yet, you're here, with *me*. You're saying you would have run away with me if I had asked you to."

There's a moment of hanging silence as George scoots closer to Dream's side, pressing through shoulders together.

"I meant it. I meant everything I said last night," he admits, dropping his chin onto Dream's armored shoulder. "I couldn't possibly see you any different— it's shocking, it's scary— but I don't blame you for not telling me. I don't see you as some atrocious person. I heard the stories, about what happened in Gwent, but I never really believed what happened was the full truth— especially after the war that broke loose a few years ago. I don't blame you for not telling me. I don't blame you for what happened in the ballroom. My guards can handle that, I know they can. I still just want *you*."

Sadly, Dream deflates at his words.

"You've known me for a month, how can you say that? After all the lies I told? After everything I caused?"

"Doesn't matter how long I've known you," George insists, "you've made me feel more in one month than I have in my entire life. That counts for something."

A shaky breath leaves Dream— something between a sigh and a laugh. "I know what you mean. I feel the same way." He presses his tongue against his bottom lip, tasting blood as he takes in a harsh breath. "Perfectly imperfect, huh?"

"What do you mean by that?"

Now, Dream raises his head. Tears are still dripping down his cheeks, but nevertheless, he smiles.

"Right people, wrong time. We're perfectly imperfect for each other."

He watches carefully as tears well in George's eyes, the realization of his words kicking in.

"*Clay?*" He says carefully, as if it was the first time saying his name again. "Please, please don't leave me."

He can't help but shake his head.

He couldn't fool himself any longer.

As much as he wanted it— as much as he wanted to put this new blooming romance above everything else— he knew he couldn't. Staying with George would only bring more harm— more sorrow.

"This was only the start of something— you deserve better than I could ever give you, anyway," Dream speaks with all the truth he can muster, "I promise you, you can forget all about me in time."

Anger floods the prince's face, his cheeks darkening in color.

"Who said I wanted to forget about you?" His voice rises, his grip on his hands loosening. "We just started, that's not fair."

Tears cascade down his fair cheeks, a hiccup of a breath leaving him.

He's never seen George cry before, has he?

"You have a castle filled with people that can replace me."

"I don't care!" He booms, loud enough for the people outside of the door to hear. "I don't care— I just want you—"

Dream leans in, dropping a kiss to the prince's warm forehead. A broken sob leaves his lips as his entire body shudders.

Tears of his own are rapidly racing down his cheeks as he pulls away.

"I never wanted to hurt you," Dream whispers against his cheek, "I know we said no more secrets, but I promise this is the last one. Okay, George? I promise."

George looks to him like he's lying— or maybe like he'll disappear if he blinks, Dream can't tell. His eyes are flickering back and forth, examining his face like it's the last time he'll see it.

"We have to go our separate ways," Dream finds himself saying, "you need to stay here, and I need to find a way to bring my kingdom back together. I can't risk you getting stuck in the crossfire again."

"Tell me you'll come back, then," George pleads, pulling their hands up and against his chest. Dream stares down at his blood-stained clothes and feels his heart drop. "Don't tell me this is goodbye. Tell me you'll come back for me."

Dream doesn't know if he can.

He doesn't know where life plans to take him next.

So, instead, he leans in and captures George's lips for the last time, and hopes that's an answer in itself. He hopes this isn't a goodbye.

He leaves his bedroom, George still sitting on one of the cots crying to himself. He wants to turn back around and comfort him. He wants to fix everything that's been broken. He wants to pull him into his arms and tell him everything's going to be alright, that maybe in due time he could return.

He knows it'd be a lie.

He doesn't know how long it'd take to fix Gwent. In the amount of time he's gone— George could move on. He could be married off and forget all about him. He hates to admit it, but he's not okay with any of that. He doesn't want George to move on— he doesn't want to move on himself. He wants everything George has to offer and more— but right now wasn't the time.

He doesn't know if he'd come back. Doesn't know when that would be.

It sucks.

He's never known anyone like George before.

Everything he wanted was so close— and yet, so far away.

The second he steps out of the room, he's slamming the door shut. The group in front of him flinches visibly, eyes scanning his face in concern.

He wipes his cheeks carelessly, sniffling.

"What's the plan?" He ends up asking.

Drista, concern clearly written on her face, clears her throat. "We need to go back to that ballroom and find Minx. If we want all this to go smoothly, she's our last obstacle."

Fundy nods. "We need to take Minx out before we can go any further with our plans."

It Was Good, While It Lasted

Chapter Summary

"I told you to run."

"I'm done running," Dream answers, his eyes flickering from the lines of guards in front of him to the now quiet and still ballroom. "I'm facing this head-on— I'm going to fix all of this."

"How can we trust you now!" Wilbur roars out loudly, his free hand waving about.
"Was this your plan all along? To plan an attack on Gantrick on Gwent's behalf?"

Chapter Notes

This will be the final chapter written from Dream's perspective. As much as I hate to lose the consistency in which I have written this book in, I think seeing George's perspective for the ending of the book will be extremely impactful, especially since we've only seen how he feels from an outside perspective :)

With that being said, I want to thank you all so much for the support! I'm not really the best with working AO3, despite having it since 2018; so I think it would just be easier to thank everyone for their comments in the notes <3 I read all of the comments and it means so much you not only care about my work but about my health and wellbeing as well :)

If you'd like to hear more from me or see more of my works, check out my wattpad @darlingsdream or head over to my twitter @darlingsvdream!

"So, your quote on quote plan is to just... kill Minx?" Dream questions.

"Essentially, yes," his sister responds. "Sapnap here has informed me that the rest of the guard force can easily take on the rest of the assassins, lock them up somewhere or... *you know*. Minx on the other hand is a different story. If we don't want something like this happening again in the near future, we need to finish her. She has a strong will, unlike those other assassins. If we leave her she can easily bring together more people and start from square one."

"Can't we just find a way to capture her? She committed a *war* crime, is that not grounds to have her jailed? If we kill her, we're just doing exactly what our kingdom has always stood for."

With a stony cold expression, Drista scoffs. She rolls her eyes, folds her arms across her chest, and leans in closer to Dream.

"By doing that, we'd be leaving Gantrick to deal with her. She is essentially *your* mess. She was only driven this crazy because of the torture she endured in Gwent, on your behalf, no mind you. We have to be the ones to finish the job, show that we as new leaders will not stand for the heinous

acts she'd committed tonight. If we were to capture her and bring her back to Gwent before our kingdom has basically turned on itself, we will get nowhere. Sometimes you have to make a tough decision for the *right* reasons."

Dream stares down at his sister in shock.

She'd grown since he last saw her, hadn't she?

"I don't want more blood on our hands, but we all can agree that it's for the right reasons. She will never stop until we put an end to her."

On either side of his sister, both Fundy and Alex nod.

"I tried talking her down," Alex starts, rubbing at his wrists nervously. "When she caught word that you were here—which I *never* meant for her to find out—she went ballistic and insisted we take this time to strike. I tried to tell her that it wasn't worth it, that life could move on from just you. She was so damn fixated, man." Alex shakes his head, taking in a broken breath. "I don't know what they did to her, but she hasn't been the same in years. She thinks that killing you will be the end goal of her misery and it's *fucked*. You saw her—she's willing to do whatever she needs to do to get what she wants now."

"When she came back the first time after going after you, they did some fucked up shit to her," Fundy tacks on, "tortured her—killed her family—I don't understand why. They took it all out on her. She has nothing left to lose now and that's where we fall short. We have a kingdom we need to save—thousands of people still counting on us—and *whatever* you have left here. She's sick in the head and that's not something we can fix anymore."

Dream nods absentmindedly.

"What's the plan from here, then?"

"Now that we're all situated and well-armed, we need to go back to the castle and find Minx and hope to God that these people from Gantrick can hold their own. We're going to have one hell of a mess to clean once this is all done," Drista responds, motioning to the wall beside her where a fair amount of swords and armor lay. "If there's been any casualties, especially those of royal blood, it is on *our* hands."

"My hands," Dream finds himself reemphasizing. "All the blame lays in my hands."

With a raised eyebrow, Drista huffs. "Glad to know you're self-aware, at least," she murmured, bending at the waist to pull a sword into her hands. "Let's get a move on, we wasted enough time waiting for you tonight."

In sync, Drista, Fundy, and Quackity make it back down the hallway, already armed and ready for a fight.

Guilt swims in Dream's gut as he turns to Sapnap who stands steadily at his side.

"Go," says Sapnap with no particular emotion, "go find her and set things right, okay?"

All the resolve he'd been holding together shatters.

It's messy—armor clanking together at awkward angles as Dream pulls Sapnap to his chest. He feels a sob tearing its way up to his chest as he drops his cheek against his friend's shoulder.

"You were one of the greatest friends I've ever had," he wept, his voice shaky. "Thank you for everything. Make sure Skeppy knows that I appreciated you two more than you'd ever know."

A hand cards through his hair messily. It's soothing and comforting—but almost intimate. He can't tell which goodbye was harder now.

"Don't fucking thank me, you idiot," Sapnap whispered into his ear, tightening his hold on him as he did. "You were the *best* best friend I could have ever asked for, even if you drove me crazy."

Dream finds himself pulling away, tears swarming his eyes as he looks to his friend. He knows if he stays a second longer he'll find himself staying. He'll go barreling back into the bedroom with Sapnap's hand in his and gather George into his arms, pretending that none of this had ever happened.

He can't do it.

"Take care of him, okay?" He motions to the closed bedroom door, shaking. "Don't let anything happen to him."

Through his blurry vision, he can still make out the way Sapnap smiles up to him. "I won't let anything happen to him, I promise."

He nods. He doesn't bother to say goodbye as he turns on his heel and takes a shaky step down the hallway. He doesn't think he can bare hearing the words of goodbye spoken, but even then, he stills when he feels Sapnap throw himself at his back, wrapping his arms around his chest shakily.

"I love you, Dream," he utters just loud enough for it to be barely audible. "Goodbye."

Before he can even react, the bedroom door behind him is shutting with a slam.

He's left wondering what the hell that was about and if he should have said goodbye in return.

He's breaking out into a sprint toward the castle—down the all too familiar trails he'd been following every morning for the past month to George. He'd gotten so used to trodding down the gravel paths with the sun barely just peeking up over the horizon, bathing in the silence of being alone as his heart raced at just the thought of seeing his prince.

This time, he's not alone, and the sun is not up. The moon is now hanging above them hauntingly and all he could hear around himself were ragged breaths and the stomping of feet.

When they burst through the castle, the hallways are filled with fleeing guests and broken bodies. There's the sound of clashing swords—the sound of a yelp—people screaming as they cram themselves into the hallway.

The four of them struggle to push past the moving crowd, all of who look up at him like a ghost. He ignores it—holds his head high as he trudges through them toward the ballroom.

When they finally make it, they're greeted by the Gantrick guards who hold their swords dangerously close to their faces accusingly. Amongst those guards, Dream can pick out four familiar faces, all of who look at him with a mixture of fear and betrayal.

Wilbur is standing tall amongst his men, stepping forward with his sword pointed toward them shakily. Techno is whipping around, eyes widening as his gaze settles on to them. Skeppy is amongst them, his hand wrapped around Bad, who is also armed.

They're all covered in blood, but not of their own.

"Don't tell me you're here to fight, too?" Wilbur spits out, waving his sword high. Blood is splattered across his right cheek— pure *fear* sprawled across his face as his eyes flicker from Alex to him.

Techno is there, pressing a hand to Wilbur's chest calmly.

"I told you to *run*."

"I'm done running," Dream answers, his eyes flickering from the lines of guards in front of him to the now quiet and still ballroom. "I'm facing this head-on— I'm going to fix all of this."

"How can we trust you now!" Wilbur roars out loudly, his free hand waving about. "Was this your plan all along? To plan an attack on Gantrick on Gwent's behalf?"

"No," he answers quickly, his voice firm, "no, I never meant for this to happen. I saw myself as a Gantrick citizen—"

"Where's his highness?" Wilbur cuts in, eyes flickering around the crowd. "What did *you* do to him."

"I didn't do anything," Dream bites back, "he's with Sapnap."

Wilbur pushes back against Techno's grip. "You're lying, aren't you? This is all your fault— you did this!"

Fire burns in Dream's chest.

It was all his fault, Wilbur was *right*. If he'd just been tougher then instead of running, he would be in Gwent, taking the throne from his parents. None of this would have ever happened. No one would be getting hurt on his behalf.

"I never wanted this to happen!" He shouts back with the same force Wilbur had been using. "I came here to get away from them too, okay? If I wanted to hurt you guys, I could have done it long ago! I could have hurt George long ago, and I swear to God, I would *never* hurt him, do you understand?"

This time, Techno drops his hand as Wilbur pushes against him. "You just expect me to *believe* you after you lied this whole time about who you were? We all saw you leave with him — you and your fellow Gwent *scum*, so what did you do to him?"

Dream stomps his foot, anger and adrenaline mixing hot in his system.

"I didn't do *shit* to him!"

"And I should believe that because? You know the reputation you've held here— the reputation you've held as a *prince*. You attacked your own guard? What's to say you wouldn't take his highness out too if he were to get in your way, too? Isn't that what you're known for, *Prince Clayton*?"

He feels someone pulling him back, but he pushes against their force and steps up closer to Wilbur.

"I wouldn't hurt him."

"Oh, and why is that?" There's a crazed look to Wilbur's eyes as he steps up into his face, the smell

of blood protruding from him. "Have you *changed* as a person or something? Finally gained some morals?"

"No— that's not—"

"What?"

"I never meant to hurt anyone—"

"Yeah? And his highness? You surely didn't hurt him too, right?"

"I didn't—"

This time, Wilbur steps so close that it has Dream stumbling back. "Give me one reason right now that would prove to me you wouldn't have hurt him."

Desperation creeps up his throat.

"I care about him—"

"Surely, you cared about a lot of things, like running away?"

"We were friends—"

"You were friends with your guard too, right?"

"I—"

"Stop giving me lame excuses! Just be honest with me, make this easier on everyone, *Clayton*, what happened—"

"I love him!" He booms, silencing the hallway.

Tension rises in the air as Dream and Wilbur stare one another down— thick enough to cut through with a sword. Dream can't help the way his chest heaves— can't help the tears that start pouring down his cheeks at the cold truth that had finally left his lips.

Wilbur steps back, confusion lacing his face.

"I love him, I wouldn't *dare* hurt him like that—" Dream stumbles over his words, broken breaths leaving his lips. "He's the only reason I'm standing here right now to fix things, okay? I want to be a better person *for him*. I want to fix all of this— I have people depending on me now— I have *him* depending on me now, and I can't keep fucking up."

The moment the words stumble out of his mouth, he feels like falling to the ground and sobbing. His body shakes as he curls his hands into fists. Maybe he hadn't realized it before, but he was right, wasn't he? George made him want to be a better person.

With a heavy breath and tears streaming steadily down his cheeks, he rose a finger accusingly to Wilbur.

"So instead of grilling me on my intentions, you should tell me if that *witch* who orchestrated all of this is still here so we can finish her off, clean our mess, and *leave*."

Typically, Dream was better at keeping his composure, and he knew that. He tended to be well calculated with how much he shared, careful with his words. He knew better than to speak the way

he had just done, but he knew it was too late now to take back what he said. At least it was the truth, for once. After years of lying to himself and others, he finally spoke one truth, despite how dramatic it sounded.

He loved George.

He loved George, and that's why he was leaving.

It was stupid. When you love someone, you want to stay with them, but that was the opposite for Dream. Sure, he wanted to stay—he wanted to be with George, more than anything, but deep down inside he knew he couldn't.

He wasn't ready to give George the love he deserved; not with all the unfinished business he had from his previous life creeping upon him.

He could never love George the way he wanted to if he constantly found himself running and hiding. No one could love like that.

Maybe that's why things would never have worked with Fundy and him, either. As much as he wanted to return Fundy's feelings—he never could. There was too much going on—too much pain to think about such a soft feeling like love.

He didn't want George just being another painful "what could have been."

Before him, Wilbur shakes his head, clicking his tongue. He looks like he's in disbelief, but Dream doesn't care. He's too busy sucking down heavy breaths, blinking the tears from his eyes as he regains his composure.

"You—"

Wilbur never finishes his sentence. Instead, Techno grabs him by the shoulder and pulls him back. Behind him, Skeppy and Bad both flinch, both of their eyebrows raised.

"I have vouched for Dream since he came here and continuously, I will vouch for him. He's not an evil person, Wilbur. He's been one of the best guards you have had these past few years," he scolds, dropping the head guard's shoulder before turning his attention back to Dream. Dream recognizes the fierceness piercing his eyes; recognizes Techno is ready to fight. "Minx? She slipped out with the crowd that was running out toward the cornfields with one of the other assassins. The rest of our guards have handled the others."

"We'll follow the crowd and find her," Fundy insists, tugging on Dream's arm to pull him from the Gantrick guards. "Drista and Alex, you two should try and help with whatever you can here. We'll meet back at the ballroom once we find her."

No one tries to object as Fundy pulls Dream past the ballroom entrance and back into the crowd that's rushing out the doors. For a moment, in the split second he's passing the ballroom, he catches a glimpse of Tommy and Tubbo; each of them looking at him with pale expressions as the king and queen stood behind them.

He sighs, using his free hand to wipe his face as they step back into the cold winter night. He pushes down the thoughts of George, of the king and queen, of Sapnap, and of Gantrick bitterly.

"Are you sure it was a good idea to leave Drista?"

Fundy doesn't falter at his side. "Before we leave, Drista should try and fix things with the

monarchy of Gantrick so we can leave with one less enemy," he responds distantly." Besides, you saw how Minx reacted earlier. She doesn't care who she targets. It's better we confront her without the princess. If something happens to either of us, she still needs to be the one returning Gwent. She has a plan."

At that, Dream scoffs, yanking his arm from Fundy's grasp. They pause in the crowd, harsh gazes set on one another.

Something dark and intangible stirs in Dream's chest.

"Then *why* did you guys come to retrieve me if she's the one with a plan."

Fundy's shoulders shake as he takes in a deep breath, but his expression doesn't change. It's cold and distant— something Dream had never seen before. It sends chills down his spine, and for a second, he wonders if Fundy is about to pounce on him. "We came here to save *your* ass. She would have come here with or without us, and it would have been better to say we at least tried than to let you *die* and feel guilty about it after. Saving you and bringing you back to Gwent with us would have just been another pro for us."

Dream lifts an eyebrow, surprised by the harsh tone that spits from Fundy's lips. It's a stark contrast from how he spoke on the dance floor just hours ago, sweetness and honey lacing his every word. Now it felt like venom was being spat right back into his face.

All he says is a quick and curt, "okay," and then he's turning on his heel, breaking through the crowd and further down the path.

He hears Fundy chase after him.

"What do we do if we don't find her?"

"We *will* find her," Dream insists, his hand resting on the hilt of his sword. "She wouldn't leave, not without finishing her job."

The two of them break away from the screaming crowds of royals and guards. He doesn't spare them a glance, his eyes trained on the paths in front of him. If they were evacuating to the fields, would Minx be targeting the other guests now too?

It wouldn't make sense to do that— but then again, she was up in arms for starting a massacre in the first place. He had to find her and quick— no more blood could have been spilled that night, not in his name at least.

As the night turns, eventually, they're drifting off from the path. The commotion of the crowd fades into the background as they near the village. They drift further from any lantern's lights as Dream stirs them into an empty field. They're wading in grass that reaches their calves when Fundy grabs him by the shoulder.

"Where are we going?" He asks, his eyebrows drawn down maliciously.

"We're going to look for Minx. She's smart. She's probably hiding out, waiting to make a move. The fields down here are the best area to hide in because of how thick they are. If she's taken to hiding, we can find her here. If she hasn't, we'll move on and check somewhere else."

He watches in the moonlight as Fundy's eyes flicker about them in the field timidly. Licking his lips, he ducks his head down and removes his hand from Dream's shoulder. "Okay. We should stay close, then."

Dream nods in agreement and wordlessly, the two of them take off into the field, pressed shoulder to shoulder as they survey the fields around them.

Hours pass, and sluggishly, they're still trodding through the fields. The sun is beginning to rise now, just peaking slightly up behind the mountain range that overlooked the kingdom. Both drenched in sweat with the reminiscences of dried blood smeared on their faces and hands, they stop in the middle of the field.

"She's not here," Fundy speaks aloud as he brings his hand to wipe his forehead. "We should go back to the castle."

Panic bubbles in Dream's chest. "We can't. We *have* to find her."

Behind him, Fundy scoffs. "You can't expect to continue trudging through the day without any proper rest and be ready to fight if we do find her. We have to go back, Clay. We can try again before we leave."

Something frantic flows through his bloodstream as he turns to meet Fundy. "No, no we have to find her. We can't go back without finding her."

The other's expression stays still as he steps closer to Dream. "We just have to make sure we're all safe and healthy before we leave. We will find her eventually, okay? Maybe she got further than we expected—"

"No, no she didn't get any further than the gates," Dream interrupted, stepping up to Fundy with straightened shoulders. "She's still here—we have to stop her. You said it yourself, we can't continue on until she's *dead*—"

Fundy raises a hand, signaling him to stop. "She's clearly not here. We need to go back, clean up, rest—make sure everything is situated with the monarchy of Gantrick, and then we can continue our search for her and be on our way," he says calmly, obviously just as tired as Dream is. There are dark circles around his stress-filled eyes, his lip having been bitten raw. "We don't have time to be reckless, Clay."

"Everything, since you guys have shown up, has been a reckless mess," he counters angrily, his voice rising in tone.

He's tired—his bones ache—his heartaches.

Everything hurt.

This—*everything* that had transcribed in the past few hours was all his fault.

It was his fault the assassins of Gwent stormed Gantrick's kingdom and castle. It was his fault that the Gantrick guards had to put up an effortful fight. He was his fault hundreds of royals scattered into the fields under the cloak of darkness, screaming for their lives. It was his fault George, and the rest of his family had been in danger.

It was his fault he was losing George.

His fault he was losing Sapnap.

He couldn't return to the castle—not without fixing at least one thing.

He *had* to get rid of Minx to fix one of his wrongs. He couldn't just return empty-handed—he had to do something to show that he was dedicated to fixing everything.

"You don't get it," he croaked out, the anger in his system being replaced with something both softer and more vulnerable. "I have to do something right tonight, I have to stop her now."

Fundy's cold expression finally cracks.

"You don't have to do this all on your own," he says, taking the slightest of steps backward. "We will figure this out, together. You, Drista, Alex, and I. We're going to make this all right again."

"You don't understand how much I've fucked up. I can't show my face back in that castle—not after all this—"

"I don't agree with what Drista said," Fundy suddenly cuts him off. "This isn't all of your fault. It's everyone's—but it's mostly Minx's. As much as I understand how bad of an idea it was to run away from the throne, *I get it*. I really do. I saw first hand what you went through, and *no one* else from that castle saw what I saw. No one will really understand why you left, but I will. I don't blame you for anything, you know."

It feels like for the seventh time, Dream starts to break.

"I hurt you so bad when I left," his voice is wet and cracking, "*I left you*—and not only that, but I shot you. I left you out to bleed that day—and you're back here, saying you don't blame me for anything? Are you *insane*? All these years, I went on living thinking you *died* because Minx told me—she told me you died!"

He's frustrated and hurt, and for the first time in years, he feels like he can find closure.

"Not only that—but I left an entire kingdom that needed me because I could handle a few punches."

"It wasn't just a *few* punches," Fundy argues, "your parents beat you *senseless*. We were children—we were *kids*. You did *not* deserve the pain you had to go through. You were right all along. If you took the throne-like that, you would have treated the kingdom the same way your parents did, just with more vengeance." The guard raises his voice, using his hands expressionaly as a sarcastic and broken laugh tore itself from his throat. "I watched you *become* a *broken* person! I watched how distant you became, I watched the way you'd beat your knuckles until they bled. I watched the way you pushed yourself. You needed a way out—and while I despise the fact it was *me* you shot—I have never wanted to hold it against you."

Tears form in Dream's eyes, but he doesn't let them fall.

"You don't have to prove anything to anyone, you understand that, right? That prince—he fucking *loves* you regardless, and you could see it in his eyes. Drista still loves you, even if she's hurt you left her. I still care about you, and I always have. I am almost positive all of us will be in your corner. The rumors that were spread about you were awful—you were just a kid looking for an actual life—how can anyone blame you?"

Fundy pauses, out of breath as he clutches his hands into fists.

"Just stop thinking this is all on you, for God's sake. You know you're not alone. You know that this—everything that happened tonight—it's all of *Gwent's* fault. If anything it should be a motivation for you to want to work to feeling better so you can return to your kingdom and fix those bastards! To prove that you aren't the person they tried to make you out to be!"

A broken laugh leaves Dream. It's quiet and faint—but it's there.

"Let's go back before you pass out from exhaustion, please."

He rolls his eyes, blinking fast to deter any tears from falling. "Thank you, Fundy," he says, despite how raw his throat feels. "I really needed that. It means a lot coming from you—as much as I hate the fact you're here, for obvious reasons, I'm glad it was you giving me that pep talk."

"Whatever, you're welcome," the guard huffs, turning back around in the field. "Let's go before I'm the one passing out from exhaustion."

The guard is moving before he can reply. With his hands still wrapped around the hilt of his sword, he takes in a heavy breath—reveling in the way his lungs burn.

He had a little more time to make things right.

He could formally apologize to the king and queen. He could apologize to his fellow guards for everything he put them through. He could say goodbye to Skeppy, properly. He could ask Sapnap what the hell their goodbye even meant. He could give George one last kiss—one last final goodbye.

It didn't need to be rash.

As much as he knew the people of Gantrick probably wanted him gone—maybe explaining himself a little more would help. Surely the commotion from the party would have calmed down by now, with the assassins having been seized and Minx nowhere to be found.

With the feeling of reassurance swelling his chest, Dream took a step after Fundy, ready to return to the place he'd called home for one last time.

And then—there was a crack.

A simple broken branch and he was whipping around, unsheathing his sword as he turned back to the field.

Before him, the familiar assassin he'd remembered Minx calling Schlatt stood, a sword in his hand, dried blood coating a cut on his forehead. He tilted his head, turning his head over his shoulder for a moment before returning his gaze back to Dream—almost disinterested.

"Sorry," the assassin says, his tone even and smooth. "I couldn't help but listen to your little heartfelt moment. It was touching, really." Mockingly, he raises a hand to his cheeks and wipes the nonexistent tears there, a haggard-looking smile pulled onto his face. "Too bad it had to end so soon."

The grass around him sways, the crunching of footsteps following.

At his side, Minx stands; ash, soot, and blood mixing on her cheeks. She bares her teeth, pulling her sword up and over her shoulders leniently.

"Looking for me?" She cocks her head, resting her wrists against the blade of her sword. "Man, I thought your cheap ass ran off without saying goodbye—but here you are," she laughs, broken and dry. "You here to let me finish your pathetic ass off now?"

He hears Fundy rushing back down the field toward them—but he doesn't take his eyes off the two assassins in front of him.

His heart drops to his stomach.

Did he always have to have such awful fucking luck?

"Personally, I was looking to finish you off," he replies to her taunts, his hands tightening around the handle of his sword. "But it seems like you two are both close to that."

The two of them cackle in sync. "Oh, you're just a fucking idiot, aren't you?" Minx laughs, taking a step closer to him. "This ends now, with both of you dying."

At her side, Schlatt takes off down the field in the direction Fundy had been in. He lets him go—knowing well enough Fundy could clearly hold his own—seeing as he survived being shot with an arrow to the chest like it was nothing. He could trust him to finish Schlatt off.

He kept his eyes trained on Minx, watching as she approached him with quiet tiptoes. He found himself moving too, moving onto his tippy toes as they began circling one another.

He wasn't the same weak seventeen-year-old who allowed himself to be choked out by her—no, he was a trained twenty-one-year-old—trained to kill—trained to be skilled in fighting.

They were on even grounds for once; grounds he finally had a chance on after all these years.

"You don't look as scared as you did in the ballroom," Minx comments. "Was it because you had people to worry about in there, is that why?"

He refuses to give in to her taunts, and so, he doesn't respond.

"When I'm finished with you, I promise you, you won't need to worry about that little prince of yours." He refuses to let himself flinch—so he sucks in a breath instead, continuing to move through the grass around him.

She doesn't seem impressed with his lack of reaction, and so, she takes a step closer, waving her sword about. "Awe, c'mon Clay, give me something to work with before I end you. Maybe when I'm done with you I can go find your prince? That'll leave one less kingdom to worry about in Gwent's eyes."

Fire—ugly and hot—rises in his chest.

"Too bad you won't touch him."

Her eyebrows raise now in excitement. "Really now? Want to dance— whoever wins gets to have the prince, what do you say? I thought he was a bit cute, so I see why you'd like him so much."

He doesn't like her jokes—doesn't like the way she uses George to taunt him—

So, he takes a step closer to her.

"Come fight me, you coward. I'm sick of hearing your voice."

And like the wind; she obliges, jumping after him with a cackle.

The moment their swords clash, loudly and messily, he sees red.

He was going to kill her if it was the last thing he did.

Located

Chapter Summary

"Wilbur!" He shouts frantically, his hand wrapped around the hilt of his sword as if it were a lifeline.

"Foolish—"

"We've located another assassin as well as Gwent's head guard, Fundy!"

Watching the foreign bedroom door slam shut was like looking down the barrel of a gun. He blinked the tears from his eyes as a cry tore its way from his throat. This had been the end, hadn't it been? He'd given Clay the gun—and he'd shot it the second the lock of the door clicked back in place.

With closed eyes, he ran his index finger over his cracked and swollen lips. The skin had been torn, broken open by his teeth when he pushed them worriedly into the once soft skin. Digging the pad of this finger down on the open and sore cracks, he felt another wave of hot tears slip down his cheeks and down to his neck.

He could feel the phantom touch of Clay on him—the hot and desperate slip of lips as warm hands dragged up from his hands to his forearms.

"Don't tell me this is goodbye. Tell me you'll come back for me."

Clay never responded. He'd gotten up from the cot, readjusting his cloak as he walked steadily toward the bedroom door. He hadn't even looked back as he opened the door and left. He didn't even say goodbye. He'd refused to meet his eyes.

"We have to go our separate ways."

As another sob wrecked its way from his throat. Knocking the breath out of himself, he wrapped his hands into the fabric of his blood-drenched shirt, looking for something to steady himself with. The smell of metal assaulted his nose as he leaned his forehead into the sheets of Clay's cot.

This isn't fair, was all he could think. *How in the world was this fair?*

With his hands falling limply into the rough sheets of Clay's cot, George cursed the world.

He didn't want anything more in the world than he had wanted Clay.

It was an infantile thought for someone who had just turned twenty-five—but did he care?

His shaky blood-stained fingers curled into the rough sheets, bunching them against his bruising palms.

He'd never experienced such a desperate *needing* feeling before. Sure, he knew what it was like to want. He wanted to explore, wanted to leave the castle, wanted to see what was beyond the walls of the kingdom he'd called his home. They were simple wants—childish ones—ones that wouldn't

necessarily kill him if he didn't get them. Eventually, he'd forget about them and move on, find something else to want, and obsess over as if it were the cycle of life.

Clay was different.

He was *someone*, someone he *wanted* for himself.

It was a selfish want, wasn't it? He was a prince, he had everything he could have wanted at his fingertips. He had the crown, he had the money, he had a multitude of servants waiting on him on hands and knees, he had loyal subjects who looked to him like a god, and he had women from all around the world looking to take his hand in marriage, shouldn't that have been enough for him?

Shouldn't that have satisfied him?

Maybe the difference was, he never *asked* for any of that stuff. He never needed any of that, after all. Even when he had all of that, it never truly satisfied him.

Clay was the one thing—the one *person* he chose he wanted on his own.

Growing up he had guards picked for him to take care of him. He had riches thrown in his face. He was given every little thing he asked for.

Growing up, his parents picked him guards and servants they thought were suitable for him. They never really paid him much mind; they just stuck around and did their job as they were told. Had he asked them to fetch him water or a piece of parchment, they'd be following his every order to satisfy him. Sometimes, he didn't even have to ask for stuff, they'd just *give* and *give*—water, set on his table as he studied—a platter of food, warm and ready for him to eat passed into his lap—his clothes neatly pressed onto the corner of his bed, ready for him to wear.

Growing up, he was given fancy clothes, fancy feasts, fancy *everything*. His clothes were silky and soft—much different from the ragged and rough clothes those of the villages beyond the castle would wear. His foods were rich, rich enough to make him sick after eating. The portions he was given exceeded what he needed, and even after countless comments about it, he was still given the overzealous amounts. His crowns were made of solid gold, his shoes lined with stones and crystals he knew he didn't need.

Growing up, everything was given to him, even if he didn't ask. New toys every week, imported foods from kingdoms and nations he had never heard from, a new book to add to his collection regularly. He never asked for any of it, and yet, it was all given to him.

Even so, he became friends with Bad because they were thrown into life together. They never really had a choice in the matter, but that was okay enough for them. They had made it work. It wasn't that George wasn't thankful for their friendship because surely, *he was*, but the truth was he never asked for Bad. He never sought out to make a friend on his own because instead, he was given one.

Again—he didn't ask for Bad's replacement, Quackity. The day Bad had stepped down, his parents had chosen Quackity as his new personal guard. He'd just turned twenty at the time—he was very much capable of making his own decisions, and yet, he never got that choice.

Clay was the first person he willingly got to choose on his own.

Clay—*Dream*—he was mysterious to George. From the day he'd first gained knowledge of the guard, walking down the gravel path mid-June just five months ago, he was intrigued.

George liked mystery. The white mask he wore to hide his identity drew him in— blatantly out of pure curiosity, of course. He wondered for days after he'd first seen the guard running down the path of what he could have looked beneath the mask. What color eyes did he have? Did he have a pretty smile? Did he have beauty marks or scars?

The second time George had seen the guard was the beginning of August as he leaned against the railing of his balcony, watching the horizon line with pointed attention. His eyes had drifted from the mountains just beyond the gates to the guards who were walking back into the entrance of the kingdom. He had seen him then— despite how far he'd been out in the distance, he recognized that small white mask.

Dream, he thought. Dream's a gate guard. Dream's mysterious.

Truthfully, George stood out on his balcony every morning after that to watch the gate guards, and every morning, his eyes landed on Dream with excitement.

The day Quackity didn't show up at his bedroom door, George went searching the castle for Ranboo, both confused and worried. Quackity didn't show up for another week, leaving George in the hands of Ranboo. In that week, he realized how temporary things could be. He'd spilled his truth to Dream about how Quackity's disappearance made him feel, but even then, did Dream really understand?

George found himself leaning against his balcony each day that week, watching the gate guards stand just beyond the gates. He'd wondered if Quackity went beyond those walls and left, and then, wondered what really stood beyond those walls. That week was spent mulling over what came next. Quackity seemed like a good man; a man who knew what he wanted in his life. Sure, he was a stiff and awkward man, barely sparked conversation with George— but he seemed content with his job.

He thought about it again and again— could he just leave, too?

He never asked to be a prince— never asked to one day be the king. Was he even fit for the job? He worked through the motions of being a royal, but he never really *felt* like one. He didn't like the power— he didn't like things just being handed to him.

Maybe he could go and see the world like Quackity was probably doing. He could leave, just as he did, and see the world for himself rather than reading it from the many books he'd been given. It was a selfish thought, surely, but he was okay with that.

A fleeting thought from his childhood began to fester. As a kid, he wanted to see the world. He wanted to leave and be an adventurer, see all the world had to offer. Then, when he was confused and lost, making the decision to leave the kingdom behind and find something more fulfilling seemed like the right answer.

When the end of that week came and Ranboo addressed him, saying it was *his* choice to pick a new royal guard, he found himself confused. He'd been given a list of the guards' names— and only one name had he remembered.

Dream.

Dream— a gate guard. He would know what's beyond the walls, wouldn't he? Maybe he could help George find what laid beyond them.

Choosing him wasn't as hard as George would say it was. It was the first decision he truly made on

his own that didn't involve parties or whatnot. For the first time, George was able to choose to put someone in his life— to have something other than what was given to him.

He thought it would be simple— using Dream to find out what laid beyond the walls— but then he got to *know* him.

Their first real encounter was anything but perfect— but George remembered the way Dream's hand felt in his, both warm and steady, and he realized just how human he was in that moment.

The descent was anything but slow. George had caught onto the feelings rather quickly. Even though he was still trying to find a way to get Dream to take him beyond the walls, he found himself falling for the guard.

Maybe it was because he was the only person who gave George the time of day and treated him something other than royal—

Or, maybe, it was the way Dream seemed to brighten at just the thought of eating warm food. Perhaps it was the humor and poise he carried— or maybe it was the way George could catch the faint sight of plump pink lips under the white mask when it had fallen out of place, curled into a shameless smile. Maybe it was the way Dream thumbed through the pages of his books with interest, hunched over his chair as pulled the book he'd been reading closer to his face— or how eager he seemed when it came to talking about traveling and venturing out of the castle.

Maybe it was the way he called him princess without shame— or the way his hands felt brushing against his skin softly— or how their arms linked perfectly— or the fact that the moment Dream had gotten his hands on flowers, he tucked them behind his ears, a smile poking out from under his mask.

George knew fairly quickly that he liked Dream more than he should.

If he had to think and pinpoint an exact time that the desire and want for more started, it happened after the truth had been spilled to Dream about why he'd chosen him as a guard. Even after he told him the dirty truth, he still tried to be a good guard and a good friend— and George couldn't just ignore that.

George couldn't help the way he found himself waiting every morning at his bedroom door for Dream to come. He couldn't help the way his heart raced in his chest every time they spoke or even *touched* for that matter.

In his eyes, Dream was everything he could have asked for— caring— mysterious— playful— *happy*— he balanced him out, he made him happy.

Dream was radiant and he *loved* it.

Selfishly, he was glad when he had been the one to break Dream's mask. He was glad Dream had trusted him enough to show him his face. He was glad that Dream seemed open to the idea of friendship between the two of them. He was glad that Dream agreed to leave Gantrick with him, even if it was just for one night.

He was glad he didn't stop him when he was leaning in for that first kiss.

Even so, George was mad.

He had him— after a month of wanting and confusion— he had Dream. For one night, a brief few hours, he *had him*. He got to feel the way their lips moved against each other— he got to revel in

Dream's careful touch— he got the confirmation that those desires he held weren't just one way— he got to dance in his arms without a care in the world—

And in just a few hours it had been ripped away from him.

The one thing he genuinely wanted— the one thing he'd gotten for just a few hours— was *gone*.

The funny thing was; he didn't care when he'd put the pieces together.

Dream— Clay— Prince Clayton.

They were all the same person in the end, weren't they? You could change the title, but you couldn't change the person.

He'd heard the tales of Prince Clayton and Fundy from Gwent, but had he believed them? The 'star-crossed lovers' trope— and then the tragic Romeo and Juliet ending where Clayton ran away while murdering his love. He never really believed it. He knew of Gwent's actions all too well— knew that their kingdom was built off of lies. After hearing of the sinful actions of Gwent's monarchy, he wasn't surprised their prince had run away. Who would have wanted to inherit a kingdom that was known for war, lies, and destruction?

Dream— Clay— he was a kind person, and George knew that. All he did, he made George happy, and that wasn't something he could overlook.

The moment he saw Clay whisked away into the dance floor with strangers he'd never seen before, he knew something was up— but he never expected Clay to be the runaway prince he'd heard so many stories about.

He knew his past must have been bad— but there was so much more he was missing.

He'd suffered, hadn't he?

"*You're so selfish.*"

"*We're way more alike than you think we are.*"

"*I know how easy it is to use people, I've done it a thousand times to get where I am now.*"

As his hands clenched the sheets of Clay's cot harder, he wept until his throat burned.

The story of Clay was messy, wasn't it? There was so much he still didn't know— so much he still wanted to know— so much he still wanted from Clay— and yet, he knew, he'd probably never see him again, would he?

His thoughts began to muddle into nothingness as he sobbed.

What was he crying about?

The fact his party had been ruined? The fact that hundreds of guests were just sent running down the streets of his kingdom, scared for their lives? The fact his kingdom and people were in danger? The fact that his guards were out there, fighting off trained assassins, trying to keep his kingdom safe?

The fact that someone he'd known for a month at most was leaving?

It was stupid, wasn't it? He'd only known *Dream— Clay*— for a month. He shouldn't be crying, not

after all that had happened.

He should be mad—he should be angry—he should have been the one throwing Clay back over to the people of Gwent—and yet, he knew that in this lifetime and the next, he would never do that.

Instead of trying to make sense of the situation, he allowed himself to cry.

He sobbed until he heard the bedroom door slam open and shut again.

As his chest heaved and he found his breath caught in his throat, he felt two hands pulling him up from the bed carefully, pulling him up and against their shoulder. Their hands carefully curled around his own to pull them from the sheets.

"Hey—George, you have to breathe, c'mon man, breathe with me."

He registered the fact someone had pressed their hand against his chest and motioned for him to breathe as he choked over his own breath. Through blackening vision, he listened to whoever was talking despite how tired and worn he was starting to feel. Following their motions, he breathed in harshly, his lungs cold as he held the breath. When he exhaled, his shoulders shook and his chest stuttered.

"Okay, that's good that's good, you're okay," they said, squeezing his forearm, "we're in this together, it's okay."

He had nodded blindly, his eyes squeezed shut.

"Let's get you out of these clothes. Can you help me?"

He peeled his eyes open, meeting the red-rimmed eyes of Sapnap who offered him a sad smile. With blurry vision, he nodded once more, sitting himself up and running his palms against his slacks. He watched, dazed and frozen as Sapnap got up from beside him. He moved toward Clay's dresser, pulling out an assortment of clothes before returning.

When all was said and done, George found himself curled against the sheets of what was Clay's cot—warm cotton clothes hanging off his shoulders. His clothes were two sizes too big for him, but either way, he was grateful to rid himself of his blood soken clothes. Sapnap had scrubbed his hands with a cold cloth until the blood that had stained them faded.

The smell of cheap soap welcomed him as he buried his face into the rough sheets, his shoulders shaking. He'd cried himself dry by now, but that hadn't stopped the silent sobs that left him.

Sapnap sat beside his feet, running his hand against his shin quietly.

He wasn't sure when it had happened, but he knew eventually he had dozed off with his head hidden in the cheap smelling sheets that smelled distinctively of his guard.

Eventually, he woke up to the sound of crashing feet. With a numbed body, he peeled his eyes open, cringing at the sunlight that poked its way through the dirtied window across from him. In his half-awake state, he could hear the end of the cot dip and creak as Sapnap, as he presumed, stood up.

"Hello? Who's there?"

The bedroom door was creaking open—slamming open as the doorknob hit the wall behind it. He felt himself jump, his hands curling reflexively into the sheets before him.

"Sapnap," an unfamiliar voice gasped out, their voice hoarse and uneven. "Did he come back?"

He could tell the man had been running. His shaking breaths echoed in the room as Sapnap timidly replied, "Techno? What do you mean?"

Urgently, the door was being slammed shut once more. As footsteps creaked across the bedroom, George found that the sunlight had been blocked. "Dream. Did he come back?" Sucking in a breath, he stares at the white sheets in front of him. He was awake, right? He wasn't just dreaming, right?

"He left last night— didn't he go to the castle to meet back with you guys?" Sapnap questions, his voice filled with sleep.

"He did," the unfamiliar voice responds, "he went out after Minx with Fundy and they were supposed to return hours ago. We can't find them anywhere."

"What?"

Blinking hard, George found himself sitting up, his head aching. Despite the pain, he looked up with wide eyes to a familiar-looking guard. His pink hair was disheveled, dry and cracked blood splattered across his cheeks. He was looking down to Sapnap with a fire in his eyes, his hands curled into fists at his sides.

"He and Fundy left late last night in the crowd to go after Minx and they haven't returned since. We've been searching for them since dawn, but no one knows where they are."

George watches as the guard stiffens, his eyes wavering from Sapnap to him in an instant. The blood in his face leaves him as he sees the ghostly expression that plays across the guard's face—

And suddenly, he knows things have gotten worse.

It's the last day of September when George finally gathers the courage to ask Ranboo the question that had been bothering him since that fateful June day beside the guards' quarters. He'd been standing out on his balcony, watching in the distance as the guards traveled down the path toward the kingdom gates when Ranboo had joined him.

"Your highness," he'd greeted softly, "you've read over the list I gave you, I presume?"

"I did," he answered, his eyes carefully following the flowing green cape of the guard he'd been watching carefully the past few months. "I had a question."

"What is it, your highness? Does it have to do with the guards?"

Refusing to turn toward his guard, George had nodded. He'd clenched his hands against the railing of the balcony, digging his fingernails into the leather of his gloves. "The guard who wears the mask with a smile on it, his name is Dream, right?"

There's a heavy pause— so long it had George turning to meet his advisor's eyes. Ranboo simply looked back down to him with confusion, his eyebrows pulled down, his lips curled downward.

"That is Dream, yes," he answered hesitantly, turning his own head away from George to look over

the balcony. "Don't tell me you were thinking that he should take the place of Quackity."

"Why not?" He found himself replying defensibly. "Is there an issue if that were my choice, advisor Ranboo?"

"No, no, that is not what I meant!" Ranboo is quick to correct himself, turning to George with a pitiful expression. He noticed the boy wringing his gloved hands slowly, tapping his foot as he did. "I just— how did you know about him, your highness? He's but a gate guard, you know."

"I heard Quackity talk about him, once or twice," he lied with ease, not wishing to hear a lecture from Ranboo about leaving the castle so carelessly. "I was curious, is all. Do you not think he's a capable guard?"

"No, I do not think that, your highness. He's a very capable guard, I know that for sure—I just meant he wouldn't be a good fit for a personal guard."

"And why is that?"

Looking almost frightened, Ranboo averted his eyes once more from the prince. "Dream is a very... He has a lot of character, that is all. I believe a personal guard should be well-put-together, as he is as much a representative as the monarchy! Dream holds himself in a very odd manner—he covers his face, refuses to let people know much about him, and he isn't a Gantrick born guard, your highness."

"Is that so?" George tips his head, leaning further against his balcony. "Quackity wasn't a Gantrick born guard either, you know."

"I know, I know, but he was picked by your parents after all. He also volunteered for the position. He knew how to carry himself in front of other royals, as timid as he was."

Without much thought, George's decision had been made.

"I wish for Dream to take Quackity's place."

"Your highness, I think this may be a bit rash of a decision! Maybe you should take more time to think upon it—"

"No. My decision has been made," he'd insisted, picking himself up from the balcony so he stood straight in front of Ranboo. "Have him meet with me tomorrow in the tea room. I wish to speak with him, alone."

"Your highness— maybe it is not such a smart idea throwing him into all of this so suddenly."

"It's fine. I am sure he will be just fine, Ranboo."

"But— your highness—"

Already walking off the balcony with his head held high, George simply rose a hand. "This is my final decision and I'd rather you not question it. You may be dismissed, Ranboo. Make sure his post is changed by tomorrow."

George thought about the last lie he told.

"When the royal advisor told me I had to pick a new guard, he gave me a list of names I never even recognized. I mulled over it for hours, sitting on the balcony. I'm pretty sure it was right after one of your stations was over because you were walking back towards the castle from the gates—and honestly, I did recognize you as the guard that had been beyond the gate before. I just made my decision from there, thinking you'd be the one that would change things."

He mulled over the words with his balcony doors open; watched as the canopy drapes of his bed swayed in the night's wind.

He shouldn't have lied, he deiced.

He should have told him the truth.

"When the royal advisor told me I had to pick a new guard, he gave me a list of names I didn't recognize—but—but I did recognize yours. Remember when you called me your stalker? I don't—I wouldn't put it like that. I was pulled in the moment I heard your voice, Dream. The second I watched your dumb self fall into a heap on the dirty gravel with Sapnap, I knew deep down I wanted you. I mulled over making the decision for hours—I wanted to do something selfish. I wanted to leave so bad, I wanted to find something that was more than just sitting, trapped in four walls. I didn't want to use you, Dream. I never did. Love at first sight—it's a stupid saying, isn't it? But I think that's exactly what I felt."

"Is... is your past really that bad?"

"Yeah," he replied, his voice shaky, "it is that bad."

The mask which hid his identity—the scar across his right cheek which had never healed properly, supposedly from an arrow—a guard who seemed all too familiar with formal customs, especially one who was untrained to be a personal guard—a guard, knowing all the formal dances a prince should know—George wasn't stupid.

He had his suspicions the moment the words had left Clay's mouth.

"My name, it's Clay."

"He isn't a Gantrick born guard, your highness."

George liked the thrill of the mystery Dream held—he also, selfishly, liked the way he felt under his hands, and more so under his lips. The moment they'd parted on the dance floor, his ring finger tracing Clay's cheekbone, he'd watched his guard be swept away in another's arms—another who looked at him with too much familiarity.

He watched all while held in another's arms as the formally dressed red-head pulled his guard from the dance floor by his hands.

"Dream?"

The sickly expression that had played across Clay's face pulled something in George's chest—something dark and ugly as he turned to the red-head who looked at him as if he wanted to hurt him.

Oh, George had thought.

"I went looking for you but I saw you slip away off the dance floor, are you okay?"

He watched as Clay's eyes flickered from his to the red-heads, and while George had only known of his facial expressions for a handful of days, he recognized the fear all too well. No, he wasn't sick he thought. This was something deeper than that. The moment he'd pulled Clay's hand into his, he saw the jealousy that burned in the stranger's eyes.

When they'd turned on the dance floor, heading straight toward Sapnap, George knew something was about to happen when Clay's hand trembled under his.

The moment the young female who looked the spitting image of his love stood in front of them, he'd put the pieces together.

He wasn't stupid.

He should have known.

Sapnap turns suddenly, making eye contact with George. The guard's face is ghostly as well, eyes blown and lips parted in a gasp. Under his gaze, George can feel himself shiver. If Sapnap was worried then he knew he should have been worried too.

"Who went searching for him, Techno?"

"I went out this morning with Skeppy and Bad, we checked the cornfields where all the other royals had evacuated last night, but there was no sign of them anywhere. They're sending another group to check the wheat fields too, but for right now the guards have been stationed in front of the gate and the market square. We're in a state of lockdown."

George is suddenly standing, pushing the uncomfortable sheets from himself. "No one's left the kingdom since last night, right?"

Techno looks down to the prince with his lips curled downward. "No, I don't believe so. We're not even sure how Minx and the other assassins were able to slip in—but if they were able to come in undetected, there's no doubt in my mind they could have left undetected as well."

His mouth went dry.

"You—you don't think she took him and—"

"No," Techno is quick to interrupt, raising a hand as he did. "I don't think she'd be able to catch him off guard like that. Clay is better skilled than that, and I am assuming his old guard wouldn't let such a thing happen to him."

Despite the fact he'd gone rigid at the mention of Fundy, he felt relief flood his system.

"We should bring you back to the castle, your highness. Our head guard can look after you in the meantime—but right now, all of our best-trained guards are needed."

All the relief he felt suddenly left his system as defense took its place. With wide eyes, he was turning his gaze toward Sapnap, who was already looking down at him.

"Techno, as much as I trust Wilbur, I promised I would look after George myself. Have him go with you guys in my place," Sapnap suddenly says, turning to Techno as he did.

"Nick—"

"I'm *not* backing down on this, Techno. Dream asked me to stay with George and that is *exactly* what I am doing."

With a sigh of defeat, Techno was backing down. "You're just as stubborn as he is, you know that? At least bring his highness back to the castle so everyone knows he's okay."

With a nod of agreement, Sapnap was suddenly at George's side, dropping his hand to his shoulder. "C'mon, let's get going."

Walking down the hallways of the castle he'd called home for his whole life felt foreign in a way. The halls had been stripped of their carpets, the once sweet smell of flowers that used to linger had been replaced with the smell of sour cleaners.

George didn't feel right standing in the halls. His vision swayed, his hands shook—and truthfully, he felt like puking. As Techno walked at a faster pace in front of him, he couldn't help but ask, "what—what happened to all the b—"

"Everything has been cleaned already," Techno answers. "The rest of the Gwent assassins that were detained are awaiting trial in the jail center. The castle has already been cleared."

Wordlessly, he nodded, scared to speak in case his voice finally gave out.

When they'd turned into the hall that lead to the ballroom, he caught sight of the opened doors and the bare floors. Standing in the doorway, scratchless, were his parents; both of whom looked ready to collapse at the sight of him. The two guards who'd stood at their sides brightened the second he'd stepped into their view, sad smiles turning upward.

Around them stood Wilbur, Bad, Skeppy, *Quackity*, and Clay's sister—all who turned their attention to him suddenly. He couldn't help the way his shoulders rose as the head guard turned to him with a hard glare.

"Your highness," he'd greeted, sounding nowhere close to relieved, "I'm so glad to see you return *safely*."

The way he speaks has him stopping in his tracks suddenly—so sudden that Sapnap's shoulder slams into his own.

"Why wouldn't I be okay?" He questions anxiously, his eyes flickering to the crowd watching him carefully before settling back on Wilbur.

"It's just—it's surprising to see that he hadn't lied, is all."

"Lied?"

"About not harming you, of course."

His blood runs cold.

"You're— you're not talking about Clay, right?"

Something in Wilbur's eyes flickers.

"You *knew* your own guard was a traitor, didn't you?"

This is why Techno was so anxious, wasn't it?

A harsh laugh leaves his chest. "No, I didn't know he was a *prince* if that is what you're asking," he answers all too bitterly and quickly, "I knew his real name, that is all."

Sapnap shifts at his side cautiously as Techno, who stands between him and Wilbur, drops his hand to the hilt of his sword.

"We do not have time for *this* again, *Will*," Techno scolded harshly. "Have you gotten—"

There is no time for Techno's question to be answered—not when there's frantic stomping coming from the hall closest to them. In a quick movement, George finds himself pressed against Sapnap and Techno as everyone turns abruptly to the source of the interruption.

Around the corner of the hall emerges a guard—a guard whose face is drenched in sweat.

"Wilbur!" He shouts frantically, his hand wrapped around the hilt of his sword as if it were a lifeline.

"Foolish—"

"We've located another assassin as well as Gwent's head guard, Fundy!"

Better Than This

Chapter Summary

A crumpled letter is extended toward George.

Sapnap turns his head, shaking it.

"At least you know he'll be back for you."

Wordlessly, George finds himself pushing past Sapnap despite the little force the guard uses to push him back. Instead of Wilbur answering, it's George answering, his chest tight and his voice wavering as he questions, "where are they?"

The guard averts his eyes under his gaze, nervously looking over his shoulder with a tremble in his shoulders. "They're down at the path by the cornfields— we need—"

George doesn't bother to stay for the answer. Despite the shout he hears from Techno and the twin gasps from his parents, George is racing down the hall where the guard had come from with his breath caught in his throat.

If Fundy was there, then by default, Clay had to be close by.

In a second flat, Sapnap is on his trail, shouting to unlistening ears.

"Prince George! Please— wait!"

With the small advantage George has on the other guards, given the fact he doesn't have bulky armor weighing him down, he finds himself holding a good few feet on the guards who follow after him with shouts.

"Prince George— your highness— you have to stay in the castle!"

"Your highness, please!"

"Where do you think you're going, George!"

He runs through the halls of the castle he's called his home— legs carrying him as fast as they can as he drowns out the sounds of the guards chasing after him.

Clay.

Dream.

He had to be okay, right?

The moment he breaks free from the castle he's bathed in the warm sunlight of the day— his nose and fingers greeted with the bitter cool November air. He pauses for a moment, taken back by the sudden change in scenery.

Where was he supposed to go? He'd only been out of the castle a handful of times, where was he

supposed to go.

Frozen with his heart lurching up into his throat, he heard the footsteps behind him draw closer and closer. Instead of feeling hands draw him back into the castle urgently—he watched with wide eyes as both Techno and Sapnap ran *ahead* of him, already breaking into sprints down a path with their hands ready to wield their swords.

He doesn't think as he follows after them, urging his body to keep up despite the pain he felt in his lungs with every breath.

There had to be a better ending to the story than this.

Carefully, George lowered himself onto the sheets beside Clay. His hands trembled against his sheets, his arms feeling weaker than they ever had before. He couldn't remember a time in his life where he'd slipped into bed with someone else.

His guard's eyes followed him carefully, creasing as he smiled. It was an all too fond of a look—a look George had never been on the receiving end of before. "What's that look for?" He'd asked as his cheek landed onto his satin pillow. He knew the answer he found, but hearing it spoken aloud—having it being brought to existence—was all the better.

"I don't know," Clay had answered, shifting onto his side comfortably. "You're just... You're pretty."

"I'm pretty?"

He'd raised an eyebrow, wiggling it all while Clay rolled his eyes, huffing.

"As if you didn't already know that," his guard joked as his eyes fluttered shut. With only the moonlight shining through the balcony serving as their light source, George watched the way Clay's eyelashes fluttered against his cheeks, flushed in the blue-tinted light.

George doesn't comment on the joke as he reaches across the sheets and presses his thumb into Clay's cheekbone softly. The action alone has his guard flinching, his eyes flickering open.

"Sorry," he'd muttered, swiping his thumb down Clay's cheek softly, "couldn't help myself."

"Your self-control just keeps slipping, doesn't it, princess?"

A low rumble of a chuckle leaves his chest as Clay reaches across the bed, dropping his hand against his hip. His thumb pressed into his hip bone, his palm cradling his side carefully. The touch has butterflies erupting in his chest, and suddenly, he's wishing to chase after his guard's lips again.

"It doesn't seem you mind, though." With his free hand, he motions toward the cloak he'd taken off his guard which had been tossed onto the floor beside them. Clay's eyes follow the movement slightly, but in a second's passing, he seems to understand what he's pointing out.

"Oh, shut up," he says all too fondly. "You're persuasive when you want to be."

"I only had to ask you once tonight to stay."

"Persuasive enough."

Clay's grip tightens against his hip as he scootches across the bed so they're only an inch away

from each other. With a shaky sigh, George had reached out, letting his free hand rest against Clay's chest.

Through tired vision, he'd stared at the way his hand looked sprawled against the white undershirt his guard wore—his fingers just an inch away from his bare neck where tanned skin had poked through. With his eyes fluttering shut, he let both of his hands land on either side of Clay's collar loosely.

"Could stay like this forever," he'd muttered against Clay's chest.

"Yeah?" His guard chuckled from above him softly. "I could too."

It didn't take them long to find the path that led to the fields. Even in the distance as they ran, George could make out the tall field of grass that led to the cornfields. Surely, the moment they'd made it onto the broken and beaten down path that ended right before the old grass, they caught sight of a handful of people standing in chaos.

Amongst them, George caught sight of the red-head guard he'd first met on the dance floor just twenty-four hours ago. He sat limply on the gravel path with his back pressed against one of the Gantrick guards—both his neck and arm being propped by said guard.

The closer they approached, the quicker George realized the damage Fundy had endured.

His formal attire had been both dirtied and *soaked* with dark blood. His right arm, which was being cradled carefully by the guard holding him up, had been *entirely* cut open—a gory sight that had George tripping over his feet until Sapnap caught him and righted him. The flesh of his skin had been torn to the *bone*.

Without much thought, George found himself gagging—his throat burning as he brought a hand to cover his mouth. He'd never seen such a gory scene before. Even at his party, when they'd walked into the hallway, he'd barely paid attention to the scene, too engrossed in keeping Clay up on his feet so they could leave.

The second the Gantrick guard noticed them approaching, he'd lifted his head. He was speaking—moving his mouth rapidly as Fundy's eyes fluttered open and shut—but whatever he said didn't exactly catch George's attention when his eyes were drawn to the ever-growing pool of blood around the two of them.

It was dark blood—so dark it stained their clothes and armor without shame. If he looked close enough, he could see the reflection of the sun and the grass in it—and that alone had him falling further into Sapnap's arms.

"Medic a'nt goin' to s've him," a drunken voice had slurred out, pulling George from his frightened state.

Beside Fundy stood several other guards—each holding down a man that George had distinctly remembered from the party.

It was the assassin Minx had tried to sick on him before Techno stepped in.

He was struggling against the guards' drips, his head angled toward Fundy as he spat out a wad of dark *blood*. The gear he'd worn had been torn apart—showing well enough that Fundy had put up one hell of a fucking fight against him. In between each open spot of his armor, blood swept through in steady streams. The guards who'd been holding him down were holding clothes to his

skin, but with the amount of struggling he'd been doing against their grips, their actions were futile in saving him.

"Try'n to act like a *hero*, try'n to save your stupid lover— die like a hero, coward!"

George couldn't make sense of what the man was saying—but the moment his *wild* eyes settled onto his, he felt Sapnap pulling him back slightly as he thrashed wildly in the hands of the Gantrick guards.

"*Clayton's!*" He'd shouted. His eyes widened as he slumped back into the gravel and dirt, a hard cough leaving him. Speckles of blood spew across his chest as he returned back to his fit of laughter. "Goo' luck fin'in him!"

Techno was there suddenly—crouching in front of Fundy.

"Where is he?"

Even though the guard could barely keep his eyes open—and though there was blood slowly trickling down the sides of his mouth, he'd lifted his eyes to the field.

"Down the field," he'd said, his voice hoarse and timid, "still alive."

His vision was swaying as he turned toward the field—the field both Techno and Sapnap were already running through.

Despite the shake in his knees, he was following after them, his hands tracing the tips of the tall grass as he did.

The shopkeep had raised their eyes to him, a knowing, yet playful smirk playing on their leathery face. "Did you change your mind on something, young man?"

He nodded contently, his hands tracing over the velvet fabric of the stand. There, sitting on the corner of the table had been the brooch he'd inspected just moments ago; but his time, Dream wasn't by his side.

His fingers danced around the cool silver carefully.

This was weird, he thought faintly. He'd never gotten a gift for a friend before, especially not like this. When it came to getting Bad things all he had to do was ask a servant; no questions asked. This time, he was picking this gift himself—giving more weight to it.

Would Dream see it that way? Would he understand how much it meant to George to get his newly found friend a gift like this?

"I'm colorblind, but, this is stone is an emerald, right?" His fingers traced the sword of the brooch timidly. When he'd looked up, the shopkeep nodded, their eyes creasing with a smile.

"Yes. It's a dark green, son. Are you looking to match it with something?"

"The man I was with," he says suddenly, turning his head to the crowd on his right. Sure enough, over the sea of people, he could see the bright white smiley face peeking up over them. "You had seen him, right?"

"I did, I sure did!"

"His cloak is a dark green, would you think the color would match?"

The shopkeep had reached out carefully, plucking the brooch from the table. "I would think so." The smile their voice held gave virtue enough for George to say he'd get it. As they bent under the counter to grab a pouch for it, they had asked quietly, "you do know the meaning of emerald, don't you?"

Of course, he did.

"The gemstone of Venus," he'd said thoughtfully, remembering the hundreds of books that lined his bedroom walls, "it's a symbol of truth and love."

When the man had lifted his head, his eyebrow quirked, George felt his stomach drop.

"That guard there must be special to you, I see."

"You could say that?"

He heard them before he saw them—the clashing of swords—the shrieking cries of a woman—the strangled gasps of a man.

"Schlatt! Schlatt, you incompetant fuck!"

There the two stood in the middle of the field, bathed in the glory of the morning sun. Though he could barely make out their silhouettes against the sun, George found himself squinting, raising a hand to his brow line to get a better view of the two.

They were far—too far to intervene in time—but sure enough, their presence had caught both of their attention.

It was hard to make out their states through the thick grass that stopped at George's hips, but from where they stood, neither looked to be in good shape. Even so, the moment his eyes landed on Clay's back—he felt his heart squeeze in his chest. They were both shaking—both drenched in sweat and blood and whatever dirt they had rolled in.

Minx was the first to notice them, given the way her sword slipped and her head tilted their way.

He'd paused in the field, Sapnap stopping just a foot in front of him as Techno continued his way toward the two of them.

Their presence—the fact they had taken Minx off guard—gave Clay the upper hand. He'd brought his blade down harder against hers, forcing her down into the field of grass and right out of their sight.

There was silence—A beat of complete and utter silence—

And then there was a scream so loud it had him jumping forward—right into Sapnap's held-up arm. The guard stared directly at him, keeping his eyes far away from the scene as he shook his head at George.

The scream rang on, echoing around them in the empty field—a scream of pure terror and anguish. In a swift motion, Clay was standing from the grass, lifting his sword above his shoulders before diving it straight into the grass—

George had never seen someone kill in front of his eyes—let alone so viciously—that is what was

happening, right? He was killing her—

The sword had come down once— twice— and then a third time—

He saw the blood splatter the once green grass— flinging into the air— painting the sky as it soared back into the grass— watched it slip from the tip of the blade as it swung back into the air with such a vicious intent—

He stood there in the field, shaking, eyes wide as he watched a murder; and Minx's screams of help didn't fall on deaf ears— not when her bones cracked— not when she screamed her acquaintance's name— and surely not when Clay was pulled back under into the grass either.

There are two seconds, two long and painful seconds between Clay being pulled into the grass and the silence that rings.

He can't help the choked name that leaves his throat.

"*Clay—!*"

It took another two seconds for Techno to fall into the grass near them— and he found himself agonizingly waiting on his tippy toes against Sapnap's arm for some word— some sign everyone was okay—

But when Techno stands, he's empty-handed, his eyes wide and his mouth open wide—

"*Nick!*"

There had to be a better ending to the story than this.

He doesn't know who moves first, whether it was he or Sapnap, but wordlessly the two of them are rushing through the several yards of grass toward Techno.

The closer they get, the more George sees— the more wet and fresh blood he sees drenching the grass— the more he can make out two limp bodies, sitting idly in the grass— the more the smell of metal assaults his nostrils—

And suddenly, he's standing over Clay's limp body. His cloak is wrapped around his shoulders, only allowing his face to be seen, where he watches as blood trickles down his left cheek. He looks content laying in the crushed grass— his eyelashes pressed against his cheeks, his lips parted just the slightest, almost as if he were sleeping—

Beside him, Minx lays there with her eyes open and her mouth dropped— No, he hadn't killed her, but the cut that drags along from the base of her throat to her collarbone tells George that she may not be alive much longer when he watches the blood drip down her porcelain skin. George suddenly sees why Clay had been so ruthlessly bringing his sword down onto her—

The armor she wore to protect her chest and arms had been beaten inward by his blade. She stares up at him for a moment before huffing a laugh. She drops her head into the grass, closing her eyes finally. He watches for a moment as her chest rises up and down— signaling she's still very much *breathing*—

But he doesn't care. Not when Techno, the actual *guard*, is there to take care of her.

He's dropping into the blood-soaked grass beside Clay, wrapping his arms around him and pulling him up into a sitting position— Sapnap bends at his knees beside him, supporting his head as he

sits up.

When they've finally got him into a sitting position, Clay lets out a rough huff of air, his eyes fluttering. Now that they've got him into a sitting position, George can see the damage that had been done.

He's alive, at least.

His hair had been pulled from its ponytail, causing knots of all kinds to form— his armor was still in contact, dirtied with mud and grass stains, but unharmed all the same— his cloak hangs against his armored shoulders with pride, dirtied, but not torn— and there, right over his heart, sits the brooch George had gotten him just a few weeks ago.

The moment his eyes flickers to Clay's neck, his breathing falters.

The bandages Sapnap had applied hours before against his chest had bled through by now— and there, against his throat, laid an assortment of new marks. What looked to be the sole of a shoe had been pressed against his jugular— either side of his throat littered with razor-thin marks.

Throwing knife marks.

The cuts bleed down his neck and down under his armor— the sight itself enough to make George cringe. His breath hitched as he took his once clean hand and pressed it gently against his neck, making sure the marks weren't deep enough to do damage (which, they were not, thank God.)

When his eyes flickered up to Clay's face, his heart had dropped. There, pressed into the side of his left cheek, was a new and deep gash that started from his eyebrow bone down to the side of his nose, grazing over his eye.

He sees why Techno had suddenly shouted out for Sapnap— because now, George is shaking— watching as blood pours down his love's face—

He's shaking as he drops his head onto Clay's armored shoulder— shaking and tearing up as he wraps his arms around his armored body— sobbing as his hands grip onto the cloth of his cloak.

Against his chest, he can feel Clay breathing shallowly.

A shallow breath leaves him.

"He's breathing," is all George says as he digs his fingers into his mangled hair. Without much thought, George sits back, adjusting his arms around Clay to get a better view of him— and yet, he's not expecting Clay to shift and yelp in pain. Stunned, George just stares back as Clay's shaky hands move to rest against his armored ribs.

With the little strength he has, Clay pulls back the slightest— opening his right eye with care.

George watches as his lips move—

And yet, no sound comes.

"Clay?"

His words fall onto deaf ears as he watches Clay's right eye flutter shut in defeat.

Suddenly Sapnap is there, hanging off his shoulder as his hand grabs delicately onto the side of Clay's head to keep him up from falling forward. There's panic in Sapnap's voice.

"Dream?" He'd called out, shaking his head the slightest. With the curl of a lip, Clay's right eye had opened once more, his lips parting—but nothing came. "That's not funny," Sapnap scolded, "please answer me—"

Clay shakes his head, and again, his eye flutters shut as he slumps tiredly against George.

To The Kingdom of Gantrick,

It is of my humblest apologies to have wasted such of your time. We would like to thank you greatly for your hospitality, as even though we were unwelcomed guests in your kingdom, you treated us as your own. Thanks to the efforts you and your kingdom made to have us safely return, a new time has rung for us and our kingdom. In a month's time from now, we will no longer be in the same place we were before. With the new year approaching, we hope to flourish as a new kingdom. I hope that Gwent may be seen in a new light with the leadership that is soon to come. Once our situation has died down, I would love to meet with you once more, Your Majesties, about the allyship we spoke of before we had to leave so abruptly. As per-request by his highness, we hope to visit soon, George. Until then, may this letter give you peace.

With love, Princess Drista of Gwent

In the month of November, George turns twenty-five. George learns what it takes to kindle a friendship—and then learns what it's like to watch it get snuffed out. George learns, in one of the worst ways possible, what it's like to love and lose.

He watches as the medic room goes from occupying four patients to zero. He attends two funerals—funerals for those who had gotten lost in their way of lives. He didn't know either, but he decided that didn't matter when mourning a loss. He watches as the other two patients leave the kingdom—uncertain if they'd ever return.

The bitter-sweet part is he never got a goodbye.

George holds a grudge against the universe—an ugly grudge that only grows with each passing day.

In the month of November, George watches as his castle becomes foreign to him. He watches as a cook and guard fall in love, greets Sapnap into his room as if it were a second home to the guard, and finds himself sitting in front of his copy of '*Pride and Prejudice*' one too many times.

In the time between November and January, George finds that he can't *cope*. He can't be awake anymore without being *haunted*. He can't sleep anymore without being shaken awake by nightmares of 'what ifs' and 'what should haves.'

Today is one of the days where he wakes up, his hands extended outward, a shout on the tip of his tongue. A name—a name he wants to speak so desperately for—a name attached to a person he'd do anything to see now.

A startled gasp leaves him as his hands slam against his chest. He's breathing heavily as if he'd run a marathon—and tears are streaming down his cheeks like they were racing.

It's not real, he tells himself as he imagines his loves throat slit open. *He's out there, he's fine, he's alive.*

He shakes, thinking back to the day in the field not so long ago.

Blood. So much blood— he'd witnessed death— watched blood seep from his eye and neck— watched him kill—

"George," a stern voice says suddenly, "Hey, hey, you have to *breathe*."

The sword's edge being turned toward him— Techno, a hair away from saving himself from being on the receiving end of Schlatt's blade.

"You're okay," the voice continues, "you're okay and he's okay. You're both okay and alive."

He's still crying when he feels his guard sit on the edge of his bed— he can't help the way he flinches— the way he crawls up toward the headboard of his bed.

Minx, sauntering into the ballroom with Quackity hanging from her hands— Minx's blade digging into Clay's throat in front of him— Minx, in a last attempt to save her ass, crushing her steel-toed boot into Clay's neck and crushing his throat—

"George, c'mon man," Sapnap cooed awkwardly, wringing his hands in his lap. "It's just me, see—" The guard raises empty hands, showing him both sides. "Harmless."

Harmless, he tells himself. *Safe* now.

It's the last day of January when George finds himself trembling at his desk, his fingers running through the pages of *Pride and Prejudice* until they find the *one* bunny-eared page. Like he'd done time and time again, he flipped to the creased page.

There, pressed between the pages, was the blue flower that Clay had tucked behind his ear back in October. It's flattened now, wilted at the edges, but still a bright blue despite the time that had passed.

He presses his fingertips against the flower, letting his eyes flutter shut as he did. He remembers the night he'd pressed the flower— the same night he'd chased down Ranboo to make sure his guard was put on the guestlist for his birthday— the same night it had finally been solidified for him that he truly *liked* Dream, despite all the lies.

It was real, he reminded himself. *It was real and he had fallen. He'd loved.*

The page Clay had once creased into his favorite book— the white mask that dangled off the side of his desk— the old green cloak that he knew didn't belong to him— they were all signs that Clay was real. He'd been there not long ago. This wasn't some figment of George's imagination.

When he opens his eyes, his vision is blurred with tears. A pitiful chuckle leaves him as he shook his head, his fingers pressing harder into the flower. "I'm sorry," he murmured to no one but himself.

The thought of Clay raced in his mind— it'd been almost three months since they'd seen one another, and yet, the feelings he'd harbored for him only seemed to grow with the distance. Bitterly, George cursed under his breath as he leaned down to press his forehead against the pages of the book once loved.

He remembers the last night they'd seen one another, pressed together in a cot that was meant for *one*. It was cold in the medic room, the only light source being a candle that had almost burnt out fully.

Across the room sat Clay's previous guard, who looked worse for wear. "*Princess Drista says we should be okay to get going tomorrow morning when the sun rises,*" he'd said carefully. "*We'd like to think we've overstayed your hospitality.*"

George hadn't looked over to Fundy. Instead, his eyes focused on the ceiling above him, his hand tracing the bandages that littered Clay's arm.

"You were all welcomed to stay for as long as you wanted," George had replied bitterly, "*I don't see why you are going so soon. You two haven't been in recovery for long.*"

Fundy had only sighed. *"The trip back to Gwent will take another week's time. Princess Drista is insistent we are all present for the assassination if it hasn't already taken place, and since we're all in better shape, she thinks the trip will be fine."*

George had almost made a comment asking why they were letting a fifteen-year-old make such choices, but the words had died on the tip of his tongue when he felt Clay's hand shift in his own.

Sitting up, he'd turned his head over to the blond; surprised to see that both of his eyes were wide open, blinking up at him.

"Hey," he'd greeted softly.

Beside him, Clay seemed to panic. He'd tried to sit up, his lips parting—but carefully and gingerly, George had pushed him back onto the mattress, shushing him. The bandages across his forehead and neck were still a color of white—better than the previous bandages that had soaked through the day before.

"Everything's okay," he'd reassured him, pressing a kiss between his knuckles. *"I'm right here."*

He remembered how he'd stayed long after both Clay and Fundy fell back asleep—he remembered the way he'd clung to Clay's uninjured hand with muffled sobs leaving him—he'd remembered the way he'd lifted the back of the blond's hand to his lips and the way he'd softly spoken, *"perfectly imperfect, right? Isn't that what you called us?"*

He also, sadly, remembered the way he'd slipped from the medic room just before the sun could rise. He'd let those be the last words he'd spoken to Clay.

He'd refused to see him off with Fundy, Drista, and Quackity.

He'd refused to let himself watch as Clay *forced* himself to try and speak. He didn't want to see it. He couldn't bear it. *So he didn't.*

He's pulled from his painful memories when there's a series of knocks at his door—loud and persistent—and then a shout.

"George!" Sapnap had called from the other side of his door cheerily. *"Georgie!"*

He doesn't lift his head from his desk, nor does he bother to answer. It's childish, he knows—and yet, he can't stop how he just doesn't seem to move.

A moment passes before Sapnap knocks again, this time, more carefully. "George? Is everything

okay?"

He doesn't answer the door that day, and sadly, he knows Sapnap just *sits* there, waiting patiently for him. It's not fair to Sapnap. He'd been his personal guard for three months now—longer than Clay had been his—and yet, George couldn't help the disappointment that curled in his gut every time he opened the bedroom door in the morning.

George is woken hours later by a hand gripping his shoulder. He sits up so abruptly from his desk—the dream he'd been having still clinging to the forefront of his brain.

He doesn't know why he calls out his name, but he does.

When he turns in his chair, it's only Sapnap standing there, smiling down at him. "No, sorry *Georgie*, I'm not Clay."

With his sleep-deprived brain, George finds the most bitter words leaving his mouth with venom lacing them. He's pushing out of his chair, his arms trembling.

"You're right, you're not him, you'll *never* be him—"

He doesn't stop himself fast enough. The second the words leave him, he's recoiling on himself, watching as Sapnap's once cheery expression turns into something so sour and brutal he's sure the guard will *hit him*.

"I'm sorry," he says, the malice he once held leaving him immediately. "I'm so sorry Sapnap—"

The guard steps toward him, raising an accusatory finger toward him. George finds himself standing still as Sapnap just *laughs*.

"You know what, I *get it*. Really, I do. I get you're hurting, I get you don't know how to cope, but for *God's sake* you're not the only person *hurting*." Sapnap's words burn. "You're not the only person who lost him, okay? You're not the only person who poured all their love into him and had to witness *everything* that happened that night, so stop acting like it. I get you're hurt, I get you miss him, because guess what, *your highness*, I miss him too!"

Sapnap's finger shakes as he drops his left hand, only to raise his opposite hand.

A crumpled letter is extended toward George.

Sapnap turns his head, shaking it.

"At least you *know* he'll be back for you."

To His Highness, Prince George,

I hope this letter finds you in good health, your highness. I know in my last letter we'd promised to visit soon, but His Majesty's condition has seen no improvement thus far. He knows you don't want to see him like this, George. I don't believe he wants you to see him like this either.

I will inform you when we see improvement. It may be longer than anticipated—but, knowing Clay and how stubborn he is, he'll do whatever he must to be better.

I am excited to meet you once more under better conditions, Your Highness. The moment Clay can hold a pen once more, please expect a letter.

With much love, Princess Drista.

To Be Wedded

Chapter Summary

With a sigh, Sapnap rose a hand to his temples, shaking it as he did. "I don't want to start something, you know that George, so I sincerely hope this is nothing to be worried about and you'll eventually be informed about whatever is going on too—but I don't like this. I don't think we need to be hiding any more truths right now."

To Her Grace, Princess Drista,

I would like to thank you for keeping me updated on Clay's condition, your letters have truly given me peace of mind over these past few months. I, too, am excited to meet you once more under better conditions. Will you be bringing your guards as well? It would be a pleasure seeing Fundy and Alex once again. The invitation for you all to visit, when the time comes, will always be open.

I do hope Gwent is seeing better times and you and your brother's reign. Until we meet again, stay safe—and do tell Clay that Nick misses him dearly for me.

With gratitude, Prince George

The thing George learns quick enough is that Sapnap isn't one to hold a grudge against him, despite how majorly he's messed up. Through some form of puzzling agreement, the two of them find themselves in the royal gardens watching the February sun graze the land as bitter wind nips at their skin.

They stand shoulder to shoulder wrapped in their winter cloaks, eyes trained on the horizon. George is the first to break their silence as he nudges their shoulders together softly. "I'm sorry again, for yesterday," he admits softly. "I know I'm not the only one hurting—it was selfish of me to not think about how much you must be hurting too, *Nick*. I know he was your bestfriend—I know you two were close. You lost that, and it was selfish of me to take my own anger out on you."

Sapnap only nudges his shoulder back in retaliation. "I know you didn't mean it, I didn't mean to snap on you either. I know how much this has... *affected* you. I'm not good at the whole comforting thing—I never really have been—but I know with time things will get easier. We can get through this together."

George tries to ignore the smile of relief that grows on his face as he turns to his guard. "You mean a lot to me, Sapnap, thank you."

Despite the light armor he wears, George hugs him regardless, the act bringing up past memories of awkward hugs he'd given to his past guard in fleeting moments. Beside him, Sapnap just shakes

his head, clapping a hand onto his shoulder with care.

"Don't get all sappy on me now, *your highness*. If we're done talking can we *please* go inside where it's warm— Skeppy told me the kitchen was making those bomb-ass pastries again."

The tension in the air breaks as George pulls away from his guard. Leave it to Sapnap to make things seem normal. "Yeah, *sure*."

They tread back inside the castle, making their way to the kitchen with familiarity. No cook questions them when they step inside— many bowing in George's presence— others giving him a happy wave and a happy 'good morning.'

With Sapnap's help, it takes the two of them only a minute to find Skeppy and Bad. The two of them are in the back of the kitchen, moving boxes of pastries around the counters side by side. George can't help but notice the smiles they both wear— the familiarity that lingers between the two of them— the way their eyes flicker to one another with tenderness before they both notice the prince and guard stepping in front of them.

Bad is the first one to pipe up, his smile growing ten-fold once he sees the brunet. "George!" He greets happily, pushing the box he'd been holding into Skeppy's hands so he could round the counter. "It's been a while! I've missed you!" It takes but a minute for George to find himself wrapped in his old friend's arms. With a hefty breath, he hugs back, dropping his chin to his friend's shoulder.

"I've missed you too, Bad," he admits solemnly, quickly shifting his tone from the sadness that had been engulfing him to something a bit happier, "but, Sapnap told me you guys had some fresh pastries."

The moment they part, it's as if life had never changed. It's as if George hadn't been avoiding seeing anyone for the past few months. It's as if George felt whole again.

The four of them fall into easy conversation as Skeppy passes them pastries fresh from the oven. They talk about nothing and everything— the small mundane things about life that George almost forgot. Despite the small pit of jealousy that lingers in his gut each time Skeppy and Bad eye one another— simple touches shared— he's still happy to be in the presence of his friends.

After the morning he spent in the garden with Sapnap, he makes more of an effort to let his guard into his room more and make frequent visits down to the kitchen.

Despite how hard it is, he manages. Despite the little sleep he still gets— the images that haunt him even when he's awake— the screams that ring in his ears and the goosebumps that raise on his skin when he thinks about the past too long— he makes the *effort* to stop dwelling.

He thinks that the initial shock phase has finally worn off— that, or he's getting better at coping with the pain. It's a little easier to cope once he gets his head out of his ass and realizes he's not the only one who had hurt from that night.

In the time he spends with Bad and Skeppy, he thinks about how life used to be. Not the bad parts, of course. He thinks about the happy parts— like the mornings in the garden where he shared breakfast with his previous guard and the silly taunting Skeppy would bring. The three of them talk about it with *happiness*, not pain. It feels good to reminiscence on the past in a good light.

In his time he spends with Sapnap, he finds himself growing closer to the guard. They make good friends, he decides. They compliment each other well. Every once in a while, Sapnap makes the

joke that "*the best friend and the boyfriend*" always get along well. George doesn't look too far into the joke.

Despite the light-heartedness their friendship holds, George learns a lot more about Sapnap in the month of February—about the *serious* side of him.

He learns the reason the guard hated royals was because his mother had been executed when he was young without trial. It was unfair—his mother paying the price for a crime she never committed. He said his childhood kingdom only held corruption. He learns Sapnap's father had taken him to Gwent at just five years old, hoping to give his son a better life. He learns the reason Sapnap became a guard was so he could follow in his father's footsteps. He learns that Sapnap's motivation for staying a guard was so that he could keep the innocent safe from corruption.

He learns that Clay was Sapnap's first true friend—that Clay had saved Sapnap's ass on more than one occasion. He learns that Sapnap had always looked up to Clay, in a way, and that if it weren't for him, he'd probably be on the run somewhere looking for a purpose in life.

And whether or not he was ever supposed to know this small slither of information—Sapnap slipped up one day.

"I think I realized that the fine line between admiration and something more crossed when we'd been officially sworn into the royal guard."

George had stiffened at those words—confused, but understanding all the same when he'd watched Sapnap turn to him with wide eyes.

"Wait, sorry, that probably sounds really bad," Sapnap had said, raising his hands in defense. *"I promise I am very much over that part of my life and I am very happy he found you! Just for clarification!"*

George couldn't help but laugh after that.

Who wouldn't fall for Clay?

"Are— are you making fun of me?"

"No, Sap—I just thought it was—"

"Stop, God, don't even continue. I don't want to know. Forget I said anything!"

To His Highness, Prince George,

When we visit again, we would all love to join. I do regret to inform you that Alex has indefinitely resigned from Gwent's personal guard. I heard from his time in Gwent, he was your guard? I'm sure you two will cross paths once more, I wager he would love to meet with you once again under different circumstances.

I do have good news for both you and Nick, George. Clay is very excited to visit and wishes for me to tell you both how much he misses you two. I am sure he can't wait to tell you of all that has happened here since his return.

Between you and I, as much as he's done here to steer our kingdom in the right direction, this will

never be his home. I saw how he looked at you that night at the party, the way he mingled with the crowd at your side as if it were nothing. This place will forever hold memories of the past for him, but Gantrick forever holds his future. You hold his future.

I have heard from Their Majesties that Gantrick will be holding a ball come the first week of Spring. Until then, George, keep your chin up.

With much love, Princess Drista (Soon to be Queen!)

To Her Grace, Princess Drista,

Between you and I, I will forever keep a place carved out for him here. If he ever wished to, under your permission, of course, he would be allowed to visit whenever he wished. I understand our paths have divided, but truly, he's taken a piece of my heart with him when he left.

In any case; I have been informed of your crowning which is to be held soon. I wish you the best of luck, Drista. You will make a magnificent Queen, and I know Gwent will forever be in good hands under your rule.

From what I've heard, your crowning is to happen before spring is to come? If I could, I would have been more than happy to attend; but with the shambles our kingdoms left our unities in, I understand the distrust that could come with my attendance.

I am more than happy to see you two come spring. Stay in good health.

With love, Prince George

Upon his awakening, there was news that George hadn't expected to be told of before the sun had the chance to rise.

"The royal court of Gwent sent a page this morning to the King and Queen," Sapnap had informed him timidly, mid-step into the room. "I overheard Techno and Wilbur speaking this morning before I left."

Sitting up abruptly, George found himself shedding the sheets he'd been wrapped in. "What did it say?"

Stepping fully into the room, Sapnap shut the door noiselessly behind himself. "I don't know, honestly," he answered sincerely, his fingers hanging onto the doorknob, "but from what I heard, I'm assuming it had something to do with the allyship between our kingdoms. If it had to do with Dream's condition, I'm sure they would have said something to us— but when I had asked them this morning about it, they had just dropped it immediately."

Something festers in George's chest at that.

"What would the guards know that I don't?" He questioned—not maliciously, to say, but more out of pure confusion. "Do you think the letter was addressed to the royal court rather than just my

parents?"

"Wilbur would have been informed of a letter to the court, wouldn't he?" Sapnap pondered out loud. "But— *why* would he be telling *Techno* about it then. He's not a part of the court—and even so, *you're* considered part of the court too. They'd have to inform you of any business occurring with other kingdoms, would they not?"

Swinging his legs off his bed, George finds himself standing. "Has Drista not written back since my last letter? Have you seen Ranboo this morning?"

"I did see him, but he didn't inform me of any letters for you. I know Skeppy received one, but that's it." With a sigh, Sapnap rose a hand to his temples, shaking it as he did. "I don't want to start something, you know that George, so I *sincerely* hope this is nothing to be worried about and you'll eventually be informed about whatever is going on too—but I *don't* like this. I don't think we need to be hiding any more truths right now."

Quietly, George agrees.

"Maybe we should go down and speak to Skeppy, then—see what was said to him?"

"Skeppy wouldn't keep something important from me," Sapnap states, dropping his head lower, "I had spoken to him long after the letters had been delivered this morning, George. His letter must have had nothing to do with what was said to the court."

With a sigh, George finds himself staring out his balcony doors, a pit growing heavily in his stomach.

He didn't have the time to have more people around him hiding secrets from him.

Since Dream's departure, the royal guards didn't typically stay silent during their dinners anymore. Maybe it had to do with "traumatic experiences bring bonding" or something along those lines, but even so, the royals found themselves starting more conversations with them rather than wholly ignoring their presence.

"The gardens are looking beautiful at the moment, your majesty," Tubbo had said, responding to some off-handed comment his mother had said moments ago. "I really love the changes they're making! I'm sure the new tulips and roses they planted will be blooming any day now."

From his seat at the dining table, George glanced up toward the corner of the room. Tubbo and Tommy were standing beside one another, a twin set of smiles spread across their faces as Sapnap looked at them unimpressed.

"Personally, I love how the markets are looking right now," Tommy interrupted, "the amount of work that has gone down there to spruce it up is *crazy*. The floor plans Foolish and Sam showed you guys the other day were *really* cool."

With his attention set fully on the guards, George had not missed the mouthed "*suck-ups*" Sapnap had sent toward the two, nor the subtle eye roll and nudge Tubbo had sent Tommy's way.

Across him, his mother gave a breathy laugh. "Thank you, you two. I'm glad you're both enjoying the renovations thus far!" Turning her way, he caught his mother clapping her hands silently, rubbing them together after. "I hope for our kingdom to look in top-shape for this year's spring ball. After all that's happened, I'm sure both our people and our guests will appreciate the work that's been put in to restore our kingdom."

Quietly bringing his fork down to his plate, George found himself averting his eyes at the subtle nod to the last party their kingdom had held. As hard as it was for him to still cope, he'd made sure to keep himself in the loop of his kingdom's state after everything had gone down. He was a prince after all—he had to focus on more than just himself.

Before he could delve too far into his thoughts of despair, his father had subtly cleared his throat—a subtle notion he'd make to get everyone's attention.

"George," he'd called out—his tone *laced* with seriousness. With his stomach leaping, George found himself looking up, his fork clattering to his plate. It was rare his father ever used such a tone with him. Overall, he'd probably heard him use such a voice on him twice, each of which were used at official court meetings, *not* dinner. "The spring ball is coming *soon*, you know."

Carefully, George rose his eyes over to the guards in the corner of the room. Sapnap's expression mirrored how he felt—confused to the fullest extent—but Tubbo and Tommy's had morphed into something so serious he felt himself become nauseous at the sight.

They knew something, too.

"I know," he replied carefully, turning his attention back to his parents. "I've been keeping to-date with the preparations since my last page to Princess Drista. Ranboo has been making sure of it."

"That's good," his father had said dismissively, "but that's not what I was going to talk about."

With his tongue pressed to the top of his mouth, George let out a silent, "oh."

"You're twenty-five now, son," he'd continued, attention turned down to his still half-filled plate, "you know, soon enough, you will be taking the throne."

Despite his parent's younger ages compared to other Kings and Queens, George knew that he'd have to take the throne sooner or later. With his eyes settled on the crown that tipped cautiously on his father's head, he nodded. "Yes—I know. Ranboo and I have been speaking with—"

"I know you will be prepared enough to take the throne, George," his father cut him off, lifting his head. A frown was pressed against his lips, his eyes dropping. It was a saddened expression, one of which didn't go with the tone he'd been using at all. At the sight, George found himself holding his breath, his eyes widening. "What I meant, was, you know it's uncommon for royalty to marry past twenty-six, don't you?"

Oh.

Oh.

With his tongue numb in his mouth, George went rigid.

It wasn't like he knew this conversation could be avoided forever. He'd had this conversation before with his parents about socializing more at balls—that at some point, he'd have to familiarize himself with at least one person from another kingdom. It would only be fitting—

But right now, his mind was thinking about anything else *but* finding someone to marry.

He'd never been one to socialize at balls and parties anyway—and truthfully, he had not been thinking about marriage since he'd first caught drift of Dream's existence. Certainly, after having met him—after having had him for just a moment—George didn't even want to think about another person—not when it was certain he could return at some point.

What the *hell* were his parents thinking?

"With the upcoming ball, we just believe it would be important for you to scout out possible—"

He doesn't stay to listen to what his father had to say. It was the least formal thing he'd probably ever done—well, *maybe* not *first* seeing as he'd quite literally broken out of his kingdom and fallen in love with a guard—but that was beside the point.

Dropping his napkin onto the table, he raised a hand.

"I don't want to talk about this," he said, his voice shaking. "Now is not the time."

Without even the confirmation that his dismissal was appropriate, George found himself walking straight out of the dining room with his shoulders shaking.

Is this what their correspondence had been with Gantrick about? They wanted George to move on, didn't they?

The Royal Court of Gantrick,

I have received your previous page, your Majesties. King Clayton and I have conversed much in the past week upon your proposal, and we wish to accept. I do believe this would be an amazing opportunity for both Gantrick and Gwent's courts to reunite once again. Rest your fears, I have not told His Highness George about the pages you have sent, nor has Clay as he still has yet to send his letters to his love. I do believe it would be vital to inform him of this soon, however. Keeping him out of the loop would lead detrimental to this plan.

Do I believe he's moved on? I do not. I still receive his pages to King Clayton. Hence, I do believe the assumption that was made in your previous letter was spot on. Upon plan, we will be arriving following the crowning that is to come. We will take our court with us.

I look forward to meeting once more. Until then, please do keep in touch. I do hope that Prince George is in better spirits than when we last conversed. I understand how hard this must be on him, especially from what Clay has said to me.

With much love, Princess Drista (soon to be crowned Queen.)

Greet Me As You Used To

Chapter Summary

As he watched his advisor leave, George peeled open the envelope, his eyes automatically flickering to the signature at the bottom. It was handwriting he hadn't seen before—a script he didn't recognize in the slightest—but God had he remembered the name which was written into the bottom of the page with care.

Dream.

Dream had sent him a letter.

The Royal Court of Gantrick,

I must thank you all dearly for your patience these past few months as I understand how difficult it can be to communicate through a third party. Her grace Drista has done a wonderful job, I believe, and between you and I, I am proud to see that Gwent will have such a strong leader in the years to come. I do believe leaving the crown in her hands will be the best decision I could ever make.

Again, I must apologize for not writing myself all this time. Drista has been very adamant about my recovery process and resting.

In regards to your most recent page, however; I must highly disagree with this plan thus far. Keeping George in the dark, in my opinion, is not worth it. I understand that his recovery process so far has been just as rocky and you fear putting pressure onto him, but I don't believe he'd be the type to just run from something like this. I don't want to scare him away with such a proposal, but if he truly isn't ready for something like this, I am sure we can all understand. I do not want this to be seen as just a political scheme, and if he were to believe that, I would be truly heartbroken.

I hope to send a letter to him soon, with your permission, of course. Until then, please reconsider the terms of the agreement you have spoken thus far with Princess Drista.

With much appreciation, King Clayton.

The first week of March came marching in without warning. With March came more uncertainties—more sleepless nights—more meals eaten alone. But, most of all, with March came spring.

After the conversation he'd had with his father, George had done his *damn best* to avoid speaking to his parents again. He'd arrive to dinners in utter silence, brush off their conversations like the plague, and as soon as his dish was finished, he was gone.

Ranboo had scolded him after the first two nights he'd done so, saying that it was "highly inappropriate" how he was acting. As he'd put it, "*a proper prince deals with the thick and thin,*

George. I understand that right now isn't the best time to be thinking of such things, but please, you must focus on other things at hand—like preparing for the ball—and getting up on your studies. When was the last time you brushed up on our kingdom's policies? Are you even—"

Frankly, George had tuned him out pretty fast and after that encounter, Ranboo was *not* allowed back into his bedroom.

As best as he could put it, for the past week, George felt like he was back at stage one all over again.

Was it fair for all of this to affect him so much? It'd been months now, shouldn't he have been able to move on?

Each night, he *remembered* the putrid smell of blood on his tongue—remembered the sight of thick red blood trickling down once beautifully tanned skin—remembered seeing wounds so deep to the bone and heads snapped at un-even angles—

Some mornings, he'd wake up with bile rising in his throat and tears pricking at his eyes. Other mornings, he'd sit still as a plank in his bed, his skin *itching*—telling him to get up and do something—telling him that he needed to get himself together and stop wallowing in his own dispair—telling him he needed to get his *fucking* act together because he was starting to look rather pathetic—

All he did was bare his eyes shut on those days and pretend that life wasn't existent.

It was so hard to just pretend life was normal again. It was so hard to ignore the belongings that littered his desk—all of which were not his own. It was so hard to pretend that for a month straight, Clay had been there the whole time. Each time he'd step out onto the balcony, he could almost feel his presence beside him. Each time he glanced over to his dresser, knowing well enough that two cloaks hung which didn't belong, he knew something was missing.

Drista had yet to write back to him yet.

He'd yet to hear from Clay.

He was certain he knew what the letter that had been sent to the court had been about now. Gwent and Gantrick had to separate all their ties, didn't they? Maybe Clay *had* changed his mind. Maybe he wanted to stay in Gwent permanently—maybe Drista had been lying, saying he wasn't happy there.

When he'd voiced these worries to Sapnap, curled up at the foot of his bed with the palms of his hands dug harshly into his cheeks, the knight had scoffed.

"You really believe they'd want to keep you two apart? You know Dream wouldn't let that happen," he'd said with confidence, *"Dream doesn't give up on things easily, George."*

Even so, George found no comfort in Sapnap's words.

There had been a few times George had acted purely out of instinct—very, very few times.

Usually, George could pride himself in being at *least* level-headed. When he had a plan, he'd think it out thoroughly before initiating. If anything, those skills could be confirmed with how he'd treated Dream in the first two weeks of them knowing one another and how he'd worked Quackity down to just make the man take him out for a walk.

But today, he was not thinking *at all*.

The moment he'd woken up, a sob trapped in the back of his throat and a cold sweat dripping down his back, his eyes had landed onto the beaten up mask which laid on his desk, having been untouched since the last time he'd broken down tiredly at his desk.

It had been at that very moment he decided that the castle felt *suffocating* and that he needed to leave in that very instant.

With tears cascading down his cheeks, George had hurriedly untangled himself from his sheets and tripped over to his wardrobe. With trembling hands and his hair in his eyes, he'd swung open the doors of the wardrobe, plucking the plainest clothes he had and one of the familiar cloaks from it.

In seconds, he was changed, hopping around his room with belated breaths as he pulled his shoes on.

He'd never made a decision so fast before—it was so unlike him, but honestly, he had no care anymore. He just needed to get far away—far from the castle—far from the memories that were threatening to tear him apart limb by limb.

With familiarity, he packed a bag, pulling a pocket knife he'd had hidden away somewhere in his room into it, and with saddened weakness, the small plastic mask from his desk.

A moment he stayed—lingering—eyes tracing the mask and then the book which laid untouched on his desk.

His heartbeat echoed in his ears as he stuffed the mask into the bag, his heart aching as he did.

"I'm sorry," he had said, his hands gripping at the bag so harsh that his knuckles turned white, "I love you."

A quiet admission made to no one but himself and the still air around him. A quiet admission that wouldn't leave the confinements of his room. A quiet admission he knew he needed to make before he could let go.

Drying the tears from his eyes, he stumbled out his bedroom door, his hand reaching out for the brick wall of the staircase. Even with trembling legs, he practically flew down the staircase like he was running for his life, his eyes set on the window at the bottom.

He hadn't touched that window since the night he and Clay had stumbled back into the castle from Northwick, but even so, without any sort of care he threw the window up loud enough for the sound to echo around him.

Without another thought, he heaved a leg over the ledge, grabbing onto the top of the window with shaking fingers.

He just needed time—just a moment of fresh air—just a moment away from everything—He'd feel guilty about it after—but would it matter anymore?

Did anything matter anymore?

The moment he'd been ready to jump down to the grass below him, the corridor door had slammed open, revealing his guard. Sapnap stood there with his lips parted, his hands wrapped around his sword with panic. And even as their eyes locked, George couldn't find himself feeling the slightest bit of guilt.

"Leave with me, Sapnap," he'd said quietly, "just for now."

George,

I wish I could have sent this sooner. I must have drafted this letter over and over again, but truly, I don't think I could find the right words. I still can't. There's no amount of words I can write on paper that'll ever convey how I feel, but I think that's okay, for now.

I promise, finally, that I'll come back to you. I should have promised that night too, because always, I'll come back to you.

You know how I always told you I wanted to be a poet? Well, not actually, but I am sure you know what I am getting at, right? Regardless; if I had the choice, I would always make sure I come back to you, George. Even if you don't want me the same way I still want you, I'd give the world to you regardless. If I had to, I would give my title a thousand times over just to protect you. I would go through that hellous guard training for you a thousand times.

This world is dark. It's tried drowning me in the darkness time and time again, but for the first time, I feel like I've finally found the sunlight. You're my sun.

I can't wait to see you again. I've been counting down the days.

Love, Dream

"*George,*" Sapnap had called out, his eyebrows furrowing. "*We can't just leave, you know that.*"

Despite the disappointment that laced his knight's voice urging him to rethink his decision, George couldn't be bothered to move from the window. Every bone in his body was telling him to move—to just leave without another word.

He knew how irresponsible this was of him, but did he care anymore? The answer to that was simple. He hadn't cared about anything for a long time now.

"*We can,*" he'd returned, his hands dropping limply at his sides. "*If you don't want to, then that's fine—but I'm going.*"

Sapnap loosened his grip around his sword carefully, leveling his eyes with George. "How long do you think you can just leave for? The first day of spring is just a few days away, George. Do you think people will take your disappearance as just a fluke? If the kingdom gets a *whiff* of another ball gone wrong, do you understand the uproar that would come from it?"

"I understand," he'd said slowly, "that's why I would come back. I wouldn't be gone long—not if you came with me."

"How would *me* helping you essentially *escape* be of any help?" Sapnap questioned frantically.

With his throat growing tight, George took a sharp breath. "You'd be the only person stopping me from leaving completely," he confessed. "If I left on my own, I don't think I'd ever come back."

With his eyes wide, Sapnap took a step closer to the prince. "If something were to go wrong, you understand I'd be under suspicion, don't you? You're not just putting yourself at risk—you're a prince, you can't just make these rash decisions! You can't just leave and decide to never come back. You have a kingdom looking up to you—"

With hardened eyes, George found himself slipping over the side of the window. His final straw had been plucked. This had been an outcome that had been boiling up for a while now. If he hadn't met Clay when he did, he probably would have found a way to leave sooner.

"Watch me."

Another second wasn't wasted stuck sitting in the window. With familiarity, George tumbled out the window, landing not so gracefully to the grass below him. Frantically pulling himself back to his feet, he hadn't even spared a glance back as he took off through the castle garden, his eyes set upon the stables.

If he were to retrace his steps from the past couple of months, George *still* couldn't explain to *himself* how he got into this situation.

It started off so simple with the disappearance of his personal guard. It wasn't uncommon for guards to go awol, not in their society. It was more common than not that a guard would go awol or become disobedient.

So how the *hell* did his story go from finding a new guard to running from the castle?

There had been so many plot twists and unconventional turns. He'd met his damn knight in shining armor—he got his unexpected love story—but it had turned bitter and cold all too quick.

A story from love and romance, to gory forsaken death, to running helplessly through a field of flowers while his guard chased him down just to avoid getting married off to some unknown kingdom to come.

In a way, he almost felt sorry for the poor historian who would have to write out his story—keyword on *almost*, because on the other hand, he felt even worse for himself, who had to essential piece together his story on his own without any guidance.

"I hate you," Sapnap had *snarled* out from his side. Despite the anger that lingered in his expression, George could tell that Sapnap hadn't really meant what he said. "I hate you *so* much."

With a raised eyebrow, George glanced up to Sapnap and then down to the horse he was mounted upon. "Oh, really?" he'd questioned playfully, pulling on the reigns of Ember. "I didn't know hating someone entailed sneaking out of a kingdom with them."

His guard rolled his eyes at that, carefully maneuvering his own horse around the thick brush of the forest that surrounding Gantrick. "Whatever," he huffed, "you know I only agreed to come for your own good. *Someone* has to watch after your irresponsible ass. If something were to happen to you, I know I would never hear the end of it from Dream."

George pretended he hadn't stilled at the mention of *him*. He'd pretended that Ember hadn't come to an obvious stop at Sapnap's side.

Pulling himself together, George found himself huffing out. "Yeah, if he ever comes back."

With his lips pressed together tightly, Sapnap turned his head over his shoulder carefully, his eyes looking far too sympathetic for George's liking.

"He will come back, you know that," Sapnap had said slowly. "I know you have your doubts, but believe me, I have known Dream for far too long. He doesn't just give up on thinks he loves that easily."

Loves.

George couldn't help but scoff.

"There's a reason I wanted to leave the castle," he points out matter of factly, "to avoid these thoughts exactly."

At that, Sapnap just shook his head in disappointment. "I am being serious, George. He *will* come back."

"If he does, I know whatever we had will be gone."

Admitting it out loud burns his throat at first. His stomach becomes queasy at the thought of what he's implying, but he can't help but spill out every thought that has been bothering him for the past week.

"I haven't heard from them in weeks and now, after some *secret correspondence* with Gwent, my parents are suggesting I marry? You don't think that's weird at all? It was so obvious my parents really liked *Dream*, even after everything that happened! Not once have they tried butting into my love life like this—it's all too coincidental, *Sap*."

Before him, Sapnap falters. He turns his head slightly, redirecting his horse as he did.

"I'd be lying if I didn't think the same," he agrees, turning back completely foward. "But I know Dream—I *know* him. He has something up his sleeve."

Staring at the back of his guard's head, George quietly hopes that he's right.

"Take a right and follow the river," George calls out, "we're going to visit one of the villages down that way."

The all too familiar smell of fresh-baked cinnamon bread almost brings tears to George's eyes—but, he's a grown adult, and he should know better than to get so emotional over something so small.

"This place is... quaint," Sapnap offhandedly commented as he tied his own horse to the post beside Ember. "Should I even ask how you knew about this place..." The guard paused, eyes dancing around their surroundings until they landed on a nearby sign. "Northwick?"

George shook his head, glancing down at Sapnap's quite obvious armor. "No, you shouldn't," he'd answered, leaning forward to grab at his guard's cloak. He readjusting the fabric rather quickly, pulling back when the cloak covered the majority of his outlandish armor and Sapnap's frantic hands swiped his away. "Don't make us stand out or you'll be the reason we get caught."

"Me? The reason we get caught?" Sapnap gasped out offendedly, bringing his hands to his face in mock shock. "Yeah, okay, your *highness*. If we get caught you better pardon me or we're going to have some big issues."

"Isn't threatening a royal illegal?"

"And isn't running from the throne treason?"

With raised eyebrows, George folded his arms over his chest. "Touché."

"Okay, so, is there a place we can eat? I am starving dude."

With a simple hand gesture, George motioned for Sapnap to follow him into the village quietly.

Despite it having been months since he'd visited, George maneuvered his way around with familiarity. Not much had changed since he and Clay had visited—the shops all looked the same—the streets the same—the familiar smell of cinnamon bread filtering the air in a mile radius of them.

With his arms wrapped carefully around himself, George finally found the tavern he'd remembered. Sapnap almost looked like he was going to cry at the sight of the place.

"Hurry, please," he shouted as he made a jog for the door. "Hurry or I will eat your arm off."

"Chill, *chill*," George spoke, allowing Sapnap to open the door for him eagerly.

The tavern wasn't nearly as busy as it had been the night he first entered the establishment. In quiet agreement, the two of them ended up sliding into a booth in the corner of the room in silence (well, almost in complete silence, if you weren't counting the very obvious clanking of Sapnap's armor as noise.)

They had been seated for a total of four seconds—just long enough for the two of them to settle into their seats and breathe—before there was a loud clanking of silverware across the tavern.

"Oh—oh my God, I'm sorry!" A voice had exclaimed hurriedly.

Both the prince and his knight had turned their heads at the sound, eyes wide as two men began approaching them.

"George—you're here again!" A familiar man—*Karl*, to be exact—had shouted.

Relief had flooded through George's system.

"Karl," he'd greeted, already standing again. "It's so good to see you again—"

Before he could get another word in, he was being pulled into a tight gripped hug. "I never thought I'd see you again around here!" he'd exclaimed into his shoulder. "I know you and Clay had

promised to return, but man, it's been *months*!"

Disheartened, George stood in place as Karl pulled away from him.

"Say, where *is* Clay?"

There wasn't time to answer when George's eyes drifted to the figure who stood patient behind Karl.

"*Quackity?*"

"George," Quackity returned, a half-amused smile dancing across his face as he turned toward the table, "Sapnap."

Between them, Karl furrowed his brows. "Oh, you guys know each other?"

"Man, do we!" Quackity had called out, practically pushing Karl out of the way as he tugged George into a hug.

The prince couldn't help but freeze at the contact.

What the actual fuck.

"You two are far from home," he'd commented, pulling away from the half-assed embrace. "Sure you guys really had to *run away* to get out here, huh?"

Finally, Sapnap was rising to his feet, his armor clanking as he did. "What are *you* doing here?"

Now, don't get them wrong, there was no bad blood held against Quackity—but the fact he was there in *Northwick* with *them*—acting so different compared to when he had previously seen him—left a sour feeling in George's stomach.

"I should be asking the same, shouldn't I?" Quackity shot back carefully as he dropped a hand onto Karl's shoulder, who stood stiffly between the group. "Maybe we should all just sit and catch up, for now, you guys must be hungry if you were just traveling from *Gantrick*."

As if something had clicked with Karl, he gasped.

"Oh— OH!" He'd shouted, turning to Quackity and then Sapnap with wide eyes. "Oh-kay..."

In a silent agreement, the four of them shuffled into the booth—Sapnap and Karl situated across from Quackity and George.

"Sapnap, was it?" Karl asked politely, extending a hand toward George's guard. Sapnap had simply nodded, taking the other's hand carefully. "My name's Karl! I'm guessing you're a guard of Gantricks? The name—it's very obvious. It's not often you see other guards from other kingdoms taking on such absurd names."

"Should I ask how you know that?"

"Well, Alex *was* a guard for Gantrick, he told me all about the weird nick-name thing the guards' had going on."

Sapnap had just nodded cautiously at that, carefully retracting his hand as he turned across the table to George.

"Now—should I ask *you* how you know Karl?"

George sighed, bringing a hand to his temples. This was not what he had expected when he said he needed a minute out of the castle.

"We met a few months ago, Clay took me here the night before my birthday."

Sapnap had simply nodded, turning back to Karl with cautious eyes.

"I have a feeling George is not just a traveler now," Karl admitted out loud, glancing toward Quackity. "And an even worse feeling that Clay wasn't either."

Over a bowl of warm rolls, Karl learns the truth about George and his former personal guard. He isn't all too taken back by the news, especially since his friend, Quackity, had such an absurd life.

"So, George," Quackity spoke in a soft whisper as he nudged his shoulder against George's. "What are you doing here, man? Isn't that big ball thing coming up soon?"

Watching from across the table as Sapnap and Karl began engaging in their own conversation, George couldn't help but shrug. "I needed a moment out of the castle, I think," he replies, eyes downcasting. "It's all too much right now—just... everything."

"I get that," Quackity admits. "There's a reason I resigned from Gwent's court. Trust me, I understand how everything has really... affected everyone. Especially Clay. That was a *really big* decision everyone had to make."

Another mention of the person he was, quite literally, trying to run from.

Placing his face in the palm of his hands, George sighed.

"You know, the moment his voice started getting better, all he'd talk about was you and Gantrick? I don't think that man shut up once about wanting to leave. You should have seen Drista's face, those two would *constantly* get into it."

"When was the last time you even heard from him? I'm sure things have changed since."

Quackity bumped their shoulders once again. "I doubt that, George. That man is like, *obsessed* with you—to the point where it's almost borderline unhealthy."

With his eyebrows raised, George raised his head and turned to glance at the man he once knew. Quackity used to be such a formal and uptight person—but, he could see now that that must have all been an act with the goofy grin that was plastered across his face.

"He was so happy when Drista promised he could go and see you come the Spring Ball. I fully returned to Northwick only a few weeks ago, trust me, I don't think much has changed since then. That man loves you so much it's *sickening*. Utterly sickening dude."

"Then—why haven't I heard from them in weeks? They've had time to correspond with the court but not me?" George simply jeered, turning to glance across the table.

Sapnap was already looking back at him, his eyes flickering back and forth between Quackity and himself.

With a pause, Quackity had turned his head and raised an eyebrow.

"What, did they not tell you or something?"

"Tell him *what*?"

Slapping a hand over his mouth, Quackity bounced in his seat. "Oh my God, they really kept that a secret? That's *fucked!* That's so fucked, man!"

With wide eyes, George found himself sinking deeper into his sweat, trying to avoid being hit by Quackity's quick-moving hands. "What— what didn't they tell me— you're freaking me out—"

Slamming both of his hands onto the table, Quackity *laughed*.

"They were planning an arranged marriage this whole time!"

The Royal Court of Gwent,

To the now crowned Queen of Gwent Drista and Prince Clayton, we are so glad to hear that the ceremony went well! We want to wish you all of the best fortunes we can, and we are forever excited to see Gwent flourish in the years to come.

We want to inform you that all the preparations for your early arrival have been completed. Against his highness Clayton's request, however, George is still unaware of your upcoming arrival. We don't wish for you to see this as us deceiving you in any way; there was just never the right time to tell him.

Upon your arrival, our head guard Wilbur along with his right-hand man, Techno, will meet you at our gates and escort you to the royal wing of the castle. We wish to meet with the two of you before it can come to George's attention. Must you have safe travels, until we meet again.

The Royal Court of Gantrick

"Excuse me?" George found himself hissing out, his hands curling dangerously tight in his lap. He lowered his eyes and inspected the newly made crescent shapes imprinting his gloves, his heartbeat echoing in his ears. "Can you repeat that?"

With his heart rattling in his chest, he couldn't help but close his eyes. What the *hell* was Quackity on about? This— this couldn't have been real. He had to have been pulling his leg, right?

At his side, Quackity stilled, his laughter dying on his tongue. "George," he spoke all too seriously, "did you seriously not know that the royal courts of Gwent and Gantrick were arranging a *traditional alliance*?"

Looking back up across the table, Sapnap stared at him with wide eyes, his lips parted in a small gasp. He could feel his heart practically still in his chest at the admission, the back of his neck heating.

They were arranging a marriage this entire time without telling him?

"It was Clay's idea," Quackity goes on to say, "he said that Drista had made the off-handed comment a while ago—that if she had to, she'd marry him off to another kingdom to get him off the throne. He'd sent a private page to the Court of Gantrick. They accepted his proposal and drafted all the papers that were needed."

Across the table, Sapnap had scoffed—his lips parting in a smile. "You're kidding me," he had said light-heartedly. "He's planning on proposing under the guise of a traditional alliance? *Damn!*" His eyes flickered back over to George with excitement. "*Dude*, you really got this man wrapped around your finger in merely a month and now he's looking to propose!"

Around him, the table had erupted into a fit of laughter. Even as Quackity banged an open hand against the table and Sapnap threw his head against the booth, George couldn't even find himself able to *smile*.

"That was a really big decision everyone had to make."

Quackity's words echo in his head softly, almost taunting him in a way.

Admittedly, it was all *too* much. In just mere moments, George had gone from thinking that Clay didn't want anything to do with him anymore to getting the rock dropped on him that he was actually planning on *proposing*.

With his stomach lurching, George found himself leaning against the table in front of him. This was supposed to be good news, *right*?

"Oh," he'd muttered quietly under his breath, "oh my God."

He *was* going to let go. He was going to forget about it all and *move on* like everyone was secretly expecting him to. This was supposed to be it. This was supposed to be the last time he thought about him.

With idle chatter around him, he'd reached out beside him, grabbing the bag he'd brought along. He wrapped his fingers against the fabric, taking a shaky breath. He couldn't escape *him*—but maybe that was for the best. He never wanted to in the first place.

Someone out there was finally on his side for once.

After having taken a moment to compose himself, George returned to the conversation with the table around him. Their discussion shifted away from his life, *thankfully*, as they got to know one another more and talk about whatever came up first.

Even after they finished their dinner, the group made their way out of the door together.

"You two should visit again soon," Karl suggested as they made their way out of Northwick, "or at least invite us to the wedding, if you know what I mean!"

George couldn't help but roll his eyes, adjusting the bag he carried against his shoulders. "Well, Karl, if there even is one, I promise we won't forget about you."

At that, the blond jumped up excitedly, leaning into Sapnap who walked at his side. Their shoulders clashed messily, causing both to stumble down the rest of the path. Their laughs echoed around them in the darkness, filling what would have been silence.

"He's all excited about this," Quackity murmured at his side. "You guys must have left a memorable impression on him or something."

With a quiet smile pressing against his lips, George nodded. "Or something..."

Even as Sapnap and George mounted their horses, Quackity and Karl lingered at the edge of their village, waving with bright smiles. As they began to take off back into the forest, George could see Karl jumping on the balls of his feet, waving excitedly as they disappeared from their view.

"Dream didn't tell me you guys met anyone when you left that one time," Sapnap pointed out.
"Karl seemed nice, at least."

"He is," George agreed without hesitation. "You two seemed to get along well." With a pause, George had tightened his hold on Ember's reigns, remembering a silly and meaningless comment from months ago. "Dream said when we first met Karl he thought you two would get along."

There was a long silence after that comment, and yet, neither of them pushed to fill it.

The following morning, just as the sun-kissed the tips of the mountains against the horizon line, there was a quiet knock at George's door. Having already been awake for some time now, shaking to the bone from what was another night terror, George blinked blearily at the bedroom door.

"Come in," he called out, his voice hoarse from what he presumed was screaming. He'd remembered once or twice Sapnap had made the comment that he'd heard him screaming in his sleep.

The door was opened with care as Ranboo stepped in, a letter held carefully between his fingers. "Your highness," he greeted with a small bow. "I have a letter for you. It was supposed to be delivered yesterday, but I presumed you were still *unwell* since you hadn't answered." With careful steps, as if he were a timid animal approaching a human for the first time, Ranboo extended the white page to George. "It's from Gwent, I believe."

Glaring at the letter, George took it carefully into his own hands. "Thank you," he'd muttered under his breath, glancing up to eye his advisor. "Was there anything else?"

Tucking his hands behind the small of his back, Ranboo shook his head—a telltale sign there *was* indeed something he was hiding. "No," he answered hesitantly, "that was all."

Forging grilling his advisor for answers—or even an explanation—George settled back against his mattress. "Okay. You can be dismissed then."

As he watched his advisor leave, George peeled open the envelope, his eyes automatically flickering to the signature at the bottom. It was handwriting he hadn't seen before—a script he didn't recognize in the slightest—but *God* had he remembered the name which was written into the bottom of the page with care.

Dream.

Dream had sent him a letter.

In the three days that follow after receiving Dream's letter, George was unsure of what to do with himself. Of course, he was more than excited to see him again, but in the pit of his stomach lingered uncertainty. *How had he recovered? Was he still going to be the same man he remembered? Would they click again as they did before?*

If this proposal thing was truly happening, was it really anything more than just a traditional alliance? He hadn't even spoken to his parents since he found out; he knew that questioning them wouldn't get him anywhere, and honestly, he was more than terrified to get *real* answers.

Being a prince who was preparing to take the throne, George *knew* what would come of a traditional alliance. After all that had happened on the night of his birthday, a traditional alliance would be one of the only things that could mend Gwent and Gantrick's relationship; that he knew for sure. An alliance such as that would be beneficial for both kingdoms as well, despite how far apart they reigned.

Was that the only reason Clay had made the proposal? To make up for all that had happened? Or did he truly wish to keep George in his life? Was this the only way he thought he could do that?

There were too many possibilities; many of which made George sick to his stomach with dread.

The night after having received the letter, George had spilled his guts to Sapnap. He told him all of his worries and doubts, and yet, the guard had just shaken his head at him and clapped a messy hand onto his shaking shoulder.

"Things will only work out for the best," he had said. "You worry too much about the 'what ifs.' Live in the moment and think of the silver linings. No matter what happens, you're going to see him again; and when you do, you two can finally figure things out and at least get some sort of closure from all of this."

Despite how silly Sapnap could act at times, he truly was more mature than he lead on. Even as hard as it was to just try and "live in the moment," George tried to take his guard's advice *for once*.

That same night, George attended dinner with the rest of his family. Even though tensions were high and he couldn't help but notice the awkward glances Tubbo and Tommy kept sending his way, he ate there with his mother and father. They didn't try to push conversation, thankfully, but they were civil. They had shot him loving smiles the second he sat down, and when he went to leave, they wished him a good night and told him they had loved him.

On the second day following receiving Dream's letter, George and Sapnap ate breakfast with Bad and Skeppy in the garden. Even though the wind was bitter, the sun was warm enough to make up for it. The flowers were already beginning to blossom, the trees blooming in colors.

Before they had left and parted their separate ways, Bad had pulled George back into the garden with cold hands and a warm smile.

"I know things have been hard," he'd started, "but I want you to know I am proud of how far you've come. Recovering from anything is hard, and I want you to know your efforts haven't gone unnoticed. I love and appreciate you, George. Keep your chin up for me, okay?"

As he lingered in the garden for a moment too long, wiping the newly forming tears from his eyes, he could feel Sapnap's presence at his side, patient as always.

"Instead of staying cooped up in the castle, why don't we go for a walk around the grounds?"

That same day, he ate with his parents, starting quiet conversation.

"*I heard the last meeting to finish everything up for the ball is tomorrow morning,*" he'd commented, placing his glass of water carefully onto the table. He'd spoken to Ranboo that same day after his walk with Sapnap about finalizations, even if he hated every minute of it. "*I was wondering if I could join?"*

Both of his parents had smiled at that. "*Of course, son. Your presence would actually be greatly appreciated. We can send someone to fetch you tomorrow morning, when we're ready, okay?"*

That night, even though nightmares plagued his dreams, he woke up in a happy mood. He pushed the ugly memories from his mind, telling himself that while it could have all been worse, it *wasn't*.

On the third day after receiving Dream's letter, Sapnap had climbed up to his tower with a bright smile. "Dude," he'd greeted as he swung the door open, "Skeppy said Bad's making waffles with powdered sugar today."

"You're kidding, he hasn't made those since the winter," George had almost gushed out—the thought of warm Belgium waffles coming to mind. "Please tell me we have some time to steal some?"

Sapnap had shrugged at that. "I can run down and grab us plates. I haven't seen Ranboo yet, but I'm assuming that he'll be the one sent when they're ready for you to attend their little meeting thing."

"Little meeting thing," George parroted, rolling his eyes. "You're so professional, Sap."

Batting his eyes, leaning on the doorframe, Sapnap had simply nodded. "Yes, I know, I know. No wonder I am the personal guard for an equally professional Prince."

The two of them had laughed at that, even as George practically pushed Sapnap out of his room after the comment. "Get going, you have me craving those waffles now and I have to get ready—or at least look decent for the meeting."

After he'd shut his bedroom door, George opened the doors of his balcony, allowing the morning light and bitter soon-to-be spring air to enter his room.

His wardrobe looked the same as it did months ago; filled to the brim with an assortment of baby blue clothing and royal blue clothes, reds scattered here and there. Going with something more casual, he'd pulled out a white ruffled button-up along with a long royal blue tunic.

Once he's run his hand through his hair a couple of times and slipped on a pair of dress shoes, George finds himself stepping out onto his balcony; a place he hasn't been to in quite some time. As the late winter hair nips at his neck, he wraps his arms around himself, huffing out a small breath.

His eyes land on the gate that stands a mile away, and even though he'd been just beyond them days ago, he *longs*. He's not sure what he really longs for as he leans against the half-opened door of his balcony, but regardless, there's an empty piece in his chest that screams out to him in agony. With a saddened smile, one of which doesn't cry out for help, but doesn't really ring of happiness, he dips his chin down and watches the people of his kingdom walk the busy streets.

He stays like that, eyes half-lidded as he shivers until he hears a timid knock at his door from inside. Lifting his eyes back up to the horizon line, he smiles. Turning his head a bit but not enough to glance into his room, he beacons Sapnap. "Come in!"

When the door clicks open, George returns his attention back to his kingdom. "Hope you don't mind eating outside, Sap. I think Ranboo would kill me if we made a mess in my room *again*."

A memory came to mind; something so small yet one that still brought him joy. It had been mid-December, sorrow still aching in his bones when Sapnap had tumbled into his room with a tray of warm breakfast foods. Needless to say, Sapnap was never made to be a waiter, because before either of them knew it the tray was tumbling against the sheets with syrup and they were laughing so hard it brought tears to their eyes.

Behind him, there's a soft chuckle—one of which does *not* belong to Sapnap.

"Princess?"

George's blood ran *cold*.

"What're you waiting on, your knight in shining armor?"

There's another chuckle—one that's soft and light, a little rough around the edges—but so *familiar* all the same. George can't help but tighten his arms around himself, his teeth going to bite down on his tongue. Slowly, he turns his head, his feet following suit thoughtfully.

There, standing in the middle of his room is a man who looks familiar in every way—but *so* different at the same time.

When their eyes meet, *he* smiles, wide and without care—and George's stomach *drops*.

He stands like a royal, his shoulders squared off and his hands hidden behind the small of his back. He wears the colors green and white, strings of silver chain leading from his shoulder to the collar of his tunic. Flecks of gold are embedded into the white he wears under his tunic, even lining the sides of the cape that flows elegantly from his shoulders to the heels of his shoes.

When George lifts his eyes, he can't help but hold a breath.

While the tunic he wore covered his neck, nothing was there to cover his face. There, across his left cheek and almost the entirety of his eye to his brow bone lays a freshly made scar. It's a little pinker than the one that lines his right cheek and the bridge of his nose, but still, it's *visible*.

In the months since he's last seen *him*, he's cut his hair. Now, just at the length to be wavy enough and brush against his ears, it looks blonder than before as a soft golden crown presses against his forehead. It's nothing fancy, just a mere golden ring that curves into what looks to be golden leaves and flowers at the edges—but even then, it's angelic on his head.

Even though there are slight differences—he can still see the *Dream* he remembers. The same freckles litter his cheeks—the same green eyes flicker down to him with such *care*—and the same blinding smile is flashed down upon him.

With a tightening throat and the threat of tears, George sways where he stands, lowering his arms slowly.

"*Clay?*" he calls out as if the image before him were a mirage. But as he takes a carefully calculated step forward, he doesn't disappear into nothingness before him—he stands steadily, his smile only growing wider as he draws closer.

"I think it's time we start over, don't you?" he says, carefully pulling his arm out from under his cape. George watches in distanced fascination as he plucks a white glove from his hand before

extending it toward him.

"My name's Clay— Prince Clay of Gwent, but, you can call me Dream if you'd like."

His voice is raspy, only just the slightest, as if he were parched. With wide eyes, George can't help but take his hand timidly into his own.

"I may not be a knight in shining armor, but I do hope I was the one you were waiting on."

With Spring comes New Life

Chapter Summary

"Goodnight, Princess," Dream spoke airily, stepping back with a smile, "until we meet again."

George watched as Dream left, a smile plastered across his face, his lips kissed red and his face flushed. This time as the door shut behind his love, George could feel hope rising in his chest.

Maybe this was the start of his happy story.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The answer Dream was looking for doesn't slip from George's lips. He's too shocked to actually answer. It's all too much— too overwhelming for him. It felt like for the past few months, he'd been dragged through the mud— and now, after all of that suffering, he was *finally* catching a breath of fresh air.

Yet, it was still all *too much*; and by the looks of it, Dream was starting to catch onto that.

With their hands slowly slipping away from one another, Dream's composure began to break. "George," he'd called out carefully the moment their fingertips broke away from one another, "is this— is *this* too much?" George's eyes helplessly followed Dream's retreating hand, watching carefully as he slipped his glove back on.

As much as he wanted to say yes and run to the farthest ends of the Earth away from him, he didn't. While it was all too much— while he, *again*, never got a say in what was to happen— while he, again, was taken off guard by it all— he couldn't blame Dream.

He couldn't have him leave again.

"No," he'd replied unconvincingly, a sniffle following. Tears prickled at his eyes at just the *thought* of Dream walking back out of his bedroom door. "No— no it's fine—"

Dream's face had softened as a tear quietly rolled down George's cheek.

"Don't cry," he pleads, taking a subtle step toward the brunet. Even though he looks ready to practically pounce on George— ready to hug him breathless— he maintains the space between the two of them. "I'm sorry," he starts, wringing his hands rigidly in front of himself. "I didn't want there to be more secrets. I *wanted* you to know I would come back months ago, I *wanted* you to know I'd always be back for you."

George stands breathlessly, willing the tears to stay behind his eyes.

This is what he'd wanted since November ended. He wanted this moment for so long— to have Dream in front of him again— to have the ability to just reach out and touch him— and now that he had it, he didn't know what to do with himself.

"I can leave," Dream suggests quietly, "and when you're ready, we can try this again. *We have time*—"

With his throat tightening, George found himself moving before he could stop himself. "Please," he'd muttered just under his breath, his eyes watering once more, "please don't leave me."

He isn't sure if it's he who moves first or Dream, but in the end, he knows it doesn't matter. In a second flat, he finds himself pressed up against the blond's chest, a breath caught in his throat as a silken hand wraps around his middle and another against the back of his head.

As if it's a promise, a kiss is pressed against the top of his head. "I'll promise it again and again," Dream whispered, despite them being the only two in the room, "I won't leave again, not unless you ask me to."

For the first time in *months*, George feels like he's whole again—like there isn't a missing piece to his heart—like there isn't a nagging feeling in the back of his head crying out for him to find what doesn't feel right.

Letting breath he'd been holding in out in the form of a broken laugh, George squeezed his eyes shut, wrapping his own arms around Dream's middle section until they clasped together at the small of his back. "I'd never ask you to leave," he confessed, "not after all this time."

He's not entirely sure how long the two of them stand like that—wrapped in one another's embrace in the rising morning light—but he knows in hindsight it would never matter. All that mattered was he was there finally; *Dream was there*, wrapped in his grasp, holding him as if his life depended on it.

"You were," George finds himself saying after some time, "you were the one I was waiting on—always have been."

Above him, Dream chuckled. "You're such a sap," he says, even though he rests his chin against George's head, "and to think, I wrote poetry about *you*."

"You're not a poet, *Clay*," George had scolded, pulling away from his embrace slowly.

"Not yet, but maybe someday, I could be."

As their laughs mingled and they pulled away from one another, a loud boisterous knock echoed in the room before George's bedroom door practically *slammed* open. There, standing in the doorway with very much *empty* arms, was Sapnap of all people.

"I hate everyone in this castle," Sapnap cursed out as he pointed an accusatory finger at Dream. Despite his angered tone, tears were lining his eyes. "I walked my ass all the way back here with waffles, ready to have a *mighty fine* breakfast, mind you, when I see *Fundy* standing in the doorway like nothing big is happening. Big fuck you to me, huh?"

At that, Dream just shook his head, parting completely from George's side as he opened his arms for Sapnap.

"I'm sorry," he says carefully, "you were the second person I was going to see, if that's any consolation?"

"No, no it's not," Sapnap whined as he crossed the bedroom and practically tackled Dream into a messy hug. "I hate you so much. *Really*, I do."

Even as George wiped his eyes with the backs of his hands hurriedly, he couldn't help but smile at the warm feeling that began to blossom in his chest.

Maybe this story did have a better ending than he expected.

"It's so good to see you again, George," Drista greeted him with a smile. She held out a small hand toward him, one which was as warm as Dream's but much softer in the same sense. "I'm so sorry to have taken you by surprise, that was *not* our intention today."

As he took her hand in his and shot a glance toward his parents who stood apologetically behind the queen, he couldn't help but shake his head. "It's no worries," he'd returned, "everything these days takes me by surprise."

Despite the harsh tone his voice held, Drista simply smiled sympathetically, pulling away from their handshake. "Can I hug you?" she asked suddenly, eyes going wide. "You— you *really* look like you may need one."

He doesn't waste a moment to bring her into a hug— minding the ruffles of her dress as he did. Behind him, he could hear Dream laughing fondly.

When he pulled away, he was faced with Fundy— *Dream's personal guard.*

"It's so nice to see you again," Fundy greeted him earnestly, shaking his hand.

With as much kindness as he can muster, he nods. "The sentiment is mutual— I'm glad to see you in better health as well, by the way." He can't help but notice the way the guard grimaces, but nevertheless, he still keeps a well-kept smile upon his face.

Once all the formalities had been pushed out of the way and George found himself familiar with a majority of the members of Gwent's royal court, he couldn't help but side-eye his own parents, his throat tight with anger. He wasn't necessarily mad at them per se, but he was peeved at the fact that once again, *he couldn't have been kept in the loop or make a decision on his own name.*

From the time he'd been born, he *never* got to choose for himself. He didn't get to choose to be a prince— didn't choose to get all the riches he did growing up— didn't choose to get stuck within the four walls of his own castle. He did, *however*, choose *Dream* to be in his life, but even then— he didn't get to choose whether he stayed or not— he didn't get to be kept in the loop about whether or not he'd return. In all senses, life wasn't fair for George, but he'd presumed he'd get over it at some point.

"I do say we should continue on with what this meeting was *originally* supposed to be," his mother had started after some time, clapping her hands.

As it had been promised the previous night, their meeting was to finish loose ends pertaining to the ball, just with extra guests.

As George, along with his parents and their guests from Gwent, followed along the caterers and designers who were eager to show off their work, he couldn't help but spare a glance toward the blond who stood protectively at his side the whole time.

And even though they were quiet for most of the day, with every shoulder bump and every eye lock the two of them had shared, George felt peace settle in his chest.

The moment George found himself standing from the dining table, ready to excuse himself for the night, Dream was standing up across the table from him, dabbing at the sides of his mouth with care.

"I can escort George back to his quarters," he offered quickly, eyes darting to George's parents.

With his heart practically leaping into his throat, George glanced over to his parents, watching with a wide gaze as the two of them nodded in agreement. "That is okay with me," his mother had spoken first, sending a soft smile to his father, "you two can be excused then."

In sync, the two of them pushed their chairs in, walking down the table until they met at one another's side. In the back of the dining hall, George spared Sapnap a final glance, taking the guard's subtle nod as a go to leave.

As the two of them slipped into the hallway, shoulders and hands brushing together, the air around them stiffened. For a moment, they had walked in silence, pinkies touching. George couldn't help but clench his hands into fists at the awkward silence, blinking fast to keep the embarrassment down.

They had kept their silence all the way until George's tower, each of them sparing a side-glance to one another as they pushed the door open. The second the door had shut behind them and George's foot met the first step of the staircase, Dream had paused behind him, clearing his throat. "You never asked why I was here early," he began, loud enough to make George pause mid-step. "Is there a reason why? Did you know why we came early?"

A beat of silence passed, but then, George was turning his head, eyes falling onto Dream's shoes. "No," he'd answered honestly, lifting his eyes until they met with serene green ones. "But I think I can make an assumption."

Dream shuffled awkwardly at the comment, his hands clenching and then unclenching at his sides. "What do you think, then?"

Swallowing down a shallow breath, George turned his body to face Dream fully. "I left with Sapnap the other day; we took a trip down to Northwick and we bumped into Quackity." George lowered his eyes at the confession, knowing that he couldn't lie anymore or brush things off like *this*. "I guess he's friends with Karl, but *anyway*— before I had met with him, no one had told me anything. After my correspondence with Drista last month, I didn't hear another word about you or Gwent besides your letter, which I received a few days ago."

His eyes had fluttered shut as he remembered the pain and confusion he'd felt the past month—the wallowing he'd gone through—*the fact he'd even tried to move on after it too*—

"Quackity said you guys were planning an arranged marriage."

Like that, he'd ripped off the bandaid. As silence ensued, George raised his head again, catching Dream's eyes carefully on him.

It was *almost* like he was back on Northwick that same October night they shared their first kiss. With such hopeful and loving eyes, Dream gazed down at him, lips parted, eyebrows raised. Just at the glance, George could feel himself slipping back into the same desperate feeling he'd felt many times upon their last week together before all hell had broken loose.

"He did?" Dream asked slowly as if he were beating around the bush.

"He did," George affirmed, nodding his head.

Adverting his eyes, Dream had taken a hesitant step toward him. "And if that were true?" he asked, eyes flickering back down to him with confidence. "What would *you* think? Would you still want *this*?"

Trying to muster as much confidence as he could, George scoffed. "Did your sister *not* read the letters I sent back to you?"

"She did," Dream countered, shrugging his shoulders, "I wanted to know if your feelings had changed."

Wetting his bottom lip, George simply smiled. "Nothing has changed," he confirmed, worrying his lip for a moment. "I mean, *things have changed greatly*, but not my feelings for you. If it *were* true, I would say it would have been unexpected, but I wouldn't be against it."

"Even if we're just re-meeting for the first time?"

"Even if," George returned, recalling the last conversation they'd had the night of his birthday. He meant it when he said Dream had made him feel more in a single month than anyone else ever made him feel—he meant it when he said if he'd asked, he would have followed Dream anywhere, even if it meant leaving the only life he'd ever known.

"I mean, it may be a bit soon, but I wouldn't mind—*not if it meant you stayed this time.*"

Taking another step forward, Dream reached out for his hand warily, threading their fingers together with distanced familiarity. With a prolonged sigh, George took another step closer, breaking the distance between the two of them. With his head pressed against Dream's shoulder, George allowed his eyes to shut. He felt safe there, coddled against the warmth of another person.

"It was my idea," Dream admitted, lowering his chin onto George's head for the second time that day. "It doesn't have to be now or any time soon, but I want you to know that's my intention. I don't plan on leaving again or returning to Gwent after today, but if this is all too much, I would understand."

"It's not," George rushed to say, catching his own breath. "You said we have time—we have time this time, right?"

"We have all the time in the world now," Dream responded, "and this time I promise that. I really do."

When George pulled back to look up at Dream, it was like nothing had changed. It hadn't felt like months had gone by in that moment—not when they *so easily* clicked back together—not when every night, George had dreamed of them reuniting. For months it had felt like Dream's ghost lingered in every crevice of his heart, never once leaving. The only reminders that months had passed presented themselves as scars, a haircut, a voice which was rough around the edges, and a change of wardrobe—but regardless, they were still *themselves*; just George and Clay, still as ever, waiting on one another.

"Okay," George breathed out, their faces just an inch away from one another. "I want this—*us*. That's never changed."

With a pitiful laugh, Dream had bent down just the slightest, letting their noses brush against one another's. "Good," he'd whispered just barely against his lips, "the same goes for me too."

George, not wasting a second of their time, rushed forward to fill the space between the two of them. With eagerness from both parties and a feverish promise, their lips met, hands coming up to grasp one another as if they'd be torn apart at any moment.

Unlike their first kiss—this one held familiarity. While it was desperate, it was also filled with yearning and *passion*. And unlike their last kiss, one which held an unsure promise and sorrow—this one held a concrete promise to it; one which was happier than the last, one that promised both of them would be happy when it all came down to it. And even though George knew the both of them were far from finishing the recovery process they both desperately needed, he knew that now they were together, they could get through it.

As they parted, both gasping for air, Dream had pressed their foreheads together, dropping both palms onto George's shoulders with delicacy. "I'll see you tomorrow, first thing in the morning, okay?"

With a peaceful nod, George watched as Dream parted from him gingerly. With his own hands pressed against the blond's chest, as they separated, his fingers traced down the buttons and chains that hung delicately from his clothes. Just as they pulled away from one another, fingers retreating with care, George's eyes flickered down to the broach he'd given Dream months ago—*the broach which now sat against his heart*.

"Goodnight, Princess," Dream spoke airily, stepping back with a smile, "until we meet again."

George watched as Dream left, a smile plastered across his face, his lips kissed red and his face flushed. This time as the door shut behind his love, George could feel hope rising in his chest.

Maybe this was the start of his happy story.

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN,

*The Royal courts of Gantrick and Gwent have requested the honor of your presence to celebrate
the union of two courts through the marriage of*

His Royal Highness, Prince George of Gantrick

and

His Royal Highness, Prince Clayton of Gwent

at Priminstine Court

on Saturday, October 12th, XXXX at 11:00 a.m.

The crisp September wind brushed against George's face refreshingly, cooling down his heated cheeks. He'd always hated events like these, even if he did have company to keep him grounded. As much as he'd wish to lay his insecurities upon trauma, he knew well enough he'd been like this long before such had happened. He simply was not a royal who'd been built for large gatherings, but he supposed that made sense—his other half was the same way, after all.

"You look cold," the aforementioned commented from his side, "do you need me to warm you up?"

With a little bit of a startle, George raised his head, turning to meet the eyes of his concerned *fiance*. Still, after all this time, with just a glance a smile rose to the prince's face, warmth blossoming in his chest. "What're you doing out here?" he sought back, raising a challenging eyebrow. "Aren't you supposed to be entertaining the *guests*?"

Rolling his eyes, Dream turned over his shoulder, eyes landing on the now opened ballroom door. "Well, Sapnap and Fundy said they could keep them busy since they saw you step out," he responded, turning back with a complacent smile. "Is everything okay? You walked out pretty quick."

Like they'd done time and time again since the Spring had passed, they found one another's hand, their fingers intertwining.

"Yeah, everything's fine," George returned honestly, giving the blond's hand a gentle squeeze. At the small action, George watched the pinch in his fiance's eyebrows disappear. "It was just—*a lot*. A lot of noise."

Dream scoffed at the admission, rolling his eyes light-heartedly. "I couldn't have agreed more. *Who would have known* putting all of our friends and other acquaintances in one room would have lead to such a *loud* event."

George simply shook his head, tugging at Dream's hands to bring him closer. "Hm, it's almost like I said that the other day before we sent out invitations for this. Who told you so? Huh?"

With pressed lips, Dream groaned, bending at the waist to drop a kiss onto George's forehead. "You're an idiot, you know that?" Dream murmured against his forehead, pulling away a single hand to brush away the stray pieces of hair from the brunet's forehead. "The court's going to be *ten times* that size in just a few days."

George couldn't help but groan, withering in Dream's embrace.

"Don't get me wrong, I'm excited and all—but not for all the *watchful eyes*."

"Oh, don't worry. You'll be so focused on me you won't even remember the audience is there in the first place," Dream shot back cockily, tightening his grip on George's hand while he placed his other against his cheek.

"You're too much sometimes," George admitted, despite knowing the blond's words held truth.

"But you love it—*you love me*."

Defeated, George nodded, watching as Dream's fingers danced across his cheek until they dipped under his chin. "You're right," he'd agreed with half-lidded eyes, "I do love you, *sadly*."

With a fake offended gasp, Dream drew closer until their noses brushed. "Oh, you don't mean that."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm positively sure, *Princess*."

Even though Dream had used the nickname time and time again over the past months, George still couldn't help but shiver at its use—and every time he did, Dream noticed. With a click of his tongue and half-lidded eyes, Dream bumped their noses together once more. "You still look cold," he said softly, "I can warm you up."

The finger under George's chin pushed up until their faces were angled together perfectly—and in George's chest, he could feel butterflies soar.

"Yeah? You can?"

Tilting his head just a bit more, Dream nodded. "If you want..."

Without faltering, George allowed his eyes to slip shut as Dream guided him forward. Their warm breaths mingled with the cold late September air—slightly chapped lips meeting one another. Although the kiss was second-lasting, just long enough to bring heat to George's cheeks, he could still feel the love that radiated with it.

Recovery hadn't occurred in just an instant. Reuniting, George found, took him back to square one all over again; night terrors dragged him down into deep panic-filled episodes and every so often when his eyes met with Dream's, he couldn't help but remember the night his love had almost bled to death in his arms.

He knew it wouldn't happen overnight though, and so did Dream; but that was okay. George hadn't been the only one still plagued with nightmares and fears of "what could have been's," but both of them acknowledged that was simply a human response to trauma.

They'd been working through it though; things had been better than before—more domestic—*safer*.

Pulling away from one another, Dream chuckled against him.

"Better?"

George had hummed in response, holding Dream's hands tighter in his own. "Much better."

Before another word could be shared, the distinctive clicking of heels had caught their attention. Both princes had turned their heads at the sound, catching the sight of blonde hair as someone had joined them out on the porch.

"Dream—*George*!" Niki had called out, clapping her hands together. She had bowed her head in recognition for a moment, her hands folding in front of her. "Sorry to bother! I didn't know you two were out here!"

Dream had only laughed at the sudden interruption. "It's okay, Niki," he'd said, keeping one hand latched onto George's hand as they pulled away from one another. "We were just about to come back in any way."

"Oh, perfect!" she'd exclaimed, pointing a finger back over her shoulder. "I'm pretty sure Techno wanted to make a speech or something. I saw him waiting around Fundy and Sapnap."

With a nod, Niki had turned back into the ballroom, the tail of her green dress trailing behind her. George couldn't help but laugh to himself, turning his gaze back up to Dream. "She hasn't changed much since I last saw her."

"Thankfully," Dream smiled, letting go of George's hand.

Before George could whine at the loss of the blond's warmth, a hand was pressed against the small of his back, pushing him forward to the still opened glass doors. "C'mon, Princess. We have a party to finish up."

"*Clay*," George had warned dangerously, his tone sharp as he tried steadying himself on the gravel path, "I don't like *this*."

"It's fine," the blond insisted, tugging at his hands harder, "I'm here with you, I'm not going anywhere."

George had all but tumbled against his own feet, steadyng himself against his fiance's forearms.

"I don't—I don't like it *here*."

Abruptly, Dream had stopped in his tracks, his expression still as he looked down to George. The two of them stood in silence in the middle of the gravel path, just meters away from the open field beside them.

Bad memories, George thought—*bad, bad, bad*—

"We don't have to, if you don't want to," Dream said softly, pulling George's hands from his forearms until he held them delicately in his own, "I just thought maybe... it would be nice to get out—make a *nice* memory in a place that used to be bad."

Used to be.

George scoffed, his eyes wandering from the blond's eyes to the field beside them.

The grass was taller than he remembered it being in November. Flowers were still abloom—littering the grassy field with splashes of white and blue. There were no reminiscences of red any more—no metallic smell—no screaming—

It was simply *silent* as Dream stood steadily in front of him, holding him, grounding him as he took in his surroundings. Birds chirped around them, bugs hummed, and across from him he could hear the steady—yet slightly wheezed—breaths of his fiance.

When his eyes wandered back to the aforementioned, he glanced down at the scars that littered his neck—and then up to the one that remained on over his eye. It had healed tremendously over the past few months, fading into nothing more than raised pale skin.

He was still here.

He wasn't gone—he was fine, healthy, even.

There was nothing to be scared about *here*.

"George," Dream called out, leaning in closer, concern lingering in his eyes, "we can leave, it's okay."

At that, George forced a smile onto his face. Dream needed this closure as much as he did—he wouldn't have brought him here if he himself didn't want to be here. "It's fine," George urged, tightening his grip onto the blond, "I promise, it's okay."

Dream had raised an eyebrow, wholly unconvinced. "Are you sure? You look like you're going to be sick."

"I'm not, I'm *fine* Dream."

Taking that as an answer, Dream began to backpedal again, tugging George along. "If it's too much, tell me, and we can leave."

As the two of them stepped into the field, crushing the grass under their feet, George could feel panic bubbling up in his chest. Before him, Dream's expression softened—his lips parting in a smile, his eyebrows drawn down. "We're okay," he insisted, holding onto him tighter, "we're both okay. I'm *here*."

George tried to focus on the smile across the blond's face as he brought them further into the field—tried to memorize the way his smile tilted slightly to the right—tried to memorize the way his freckles looked on his crinkled up cheeks—

They came to a halt in the middle of the field—George's eyes moving toward the kingdom gates touching the skyline and the mountains that towered over them.

Dream turned his head, following his gaze as he turned his eyes up to the mountains. "It's a pretty view from here." George didn't verbally respond. Instead, he simply allowed Dream to tug the two of them into the grass. Tentatively, Dream let go of George's hands to sit by his side, pressing a soft kiss to his temple. "See, all good," he laughed, leaning over to bump their shoulders. "The sun's going to be setting soon."

George raised his eyes to the sky which was cloudless and colored pink now. Distracted, he barely felt the hand on his shoulder that urged him to lay in the grass—following the touch blindly. When George finally returned his attention to Dream, the both of them were laying in the grass now, laying opposite ways from one another but their shoulders touching. Dream's eyes were settled on him, a smile splitting his lips. George couldn't help the way he smiled in return or the way his cheeks flushed with heat.

This felt right, George decided. After all this time, he finally felt like he was where he was meant to be. He didn't feel like he had to run to the corners of the Earth anymore—didn't feel like he didn't belong—not as long as he had Dream by his side.

"George," Dream called out carefully, reaching across the grass to encase his hand. "I love you."

Yet, George couldn't help the way his eyes adverted to the sky at the admission, despite it not being the first time he'd said it. With his free hand, he brushed his hair out of his eyes, the smile he held not once faltering.

"I love you too, *idiot*."

Chapter End Notes

As simple as the conclusion may be compared to the whirlwind of turns this book took; I am so happy to say that Reflections has finally been completed.

These past 6 months writing this story have been crazy. Because of your guys' support, I was able to return to writing and finish my first full-length "novel" basically. I am truly happy, for the first time in a while, with the finished piece I've created.

If you're interested in hearing me speak more about this story and my thoughts on it, you can check me out on twitter @ DarlingsvDream and on wattpad @ darlingsdream. In my wattpad version, I made some comments about this story and how I felt about it if you're interested in checking it out!

As sad as I am to complete it, all stories must come to an end! Until the next one guys!

<3, Naomi

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!